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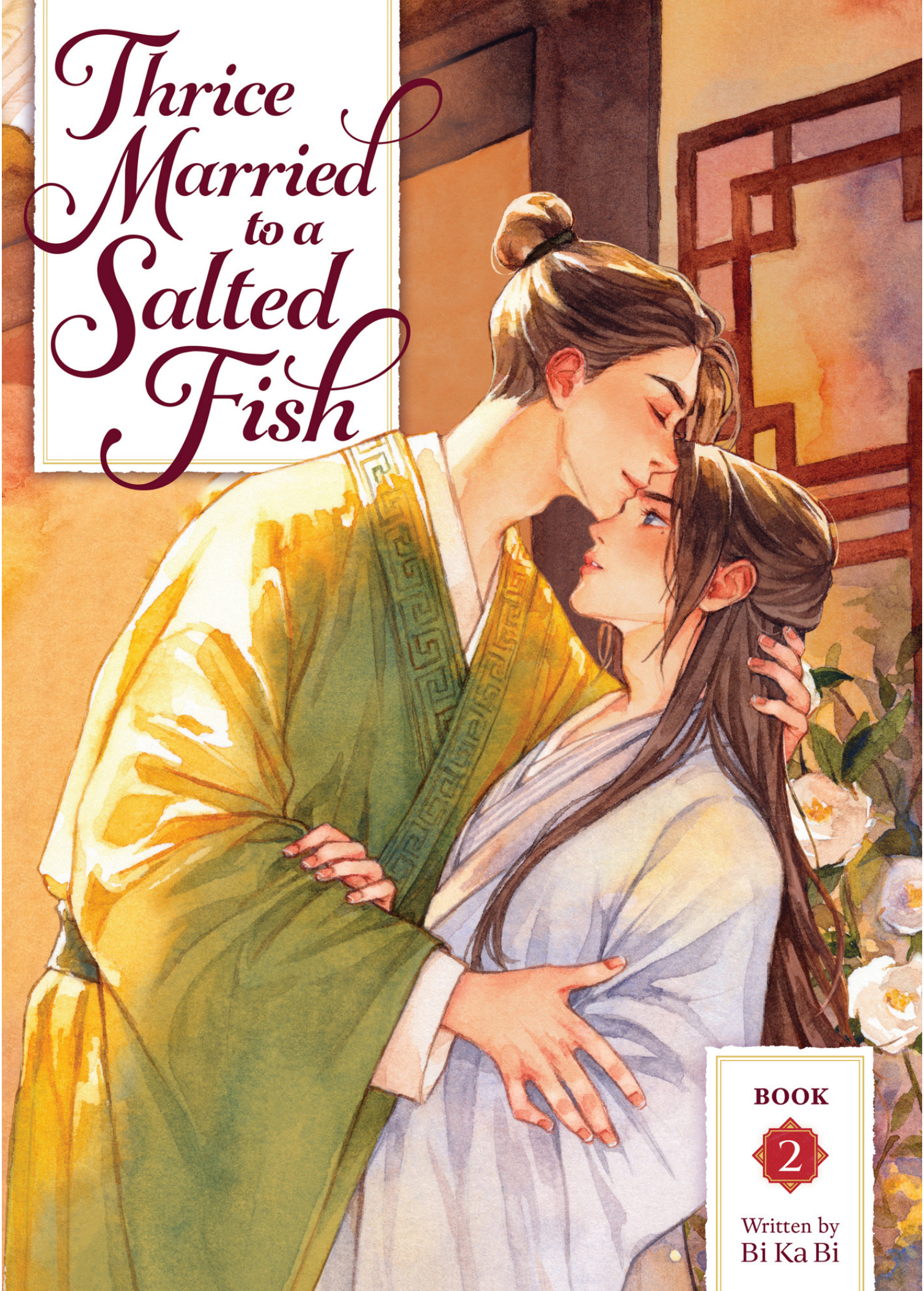

BOOK 2

Written by
Bi Ka Bi

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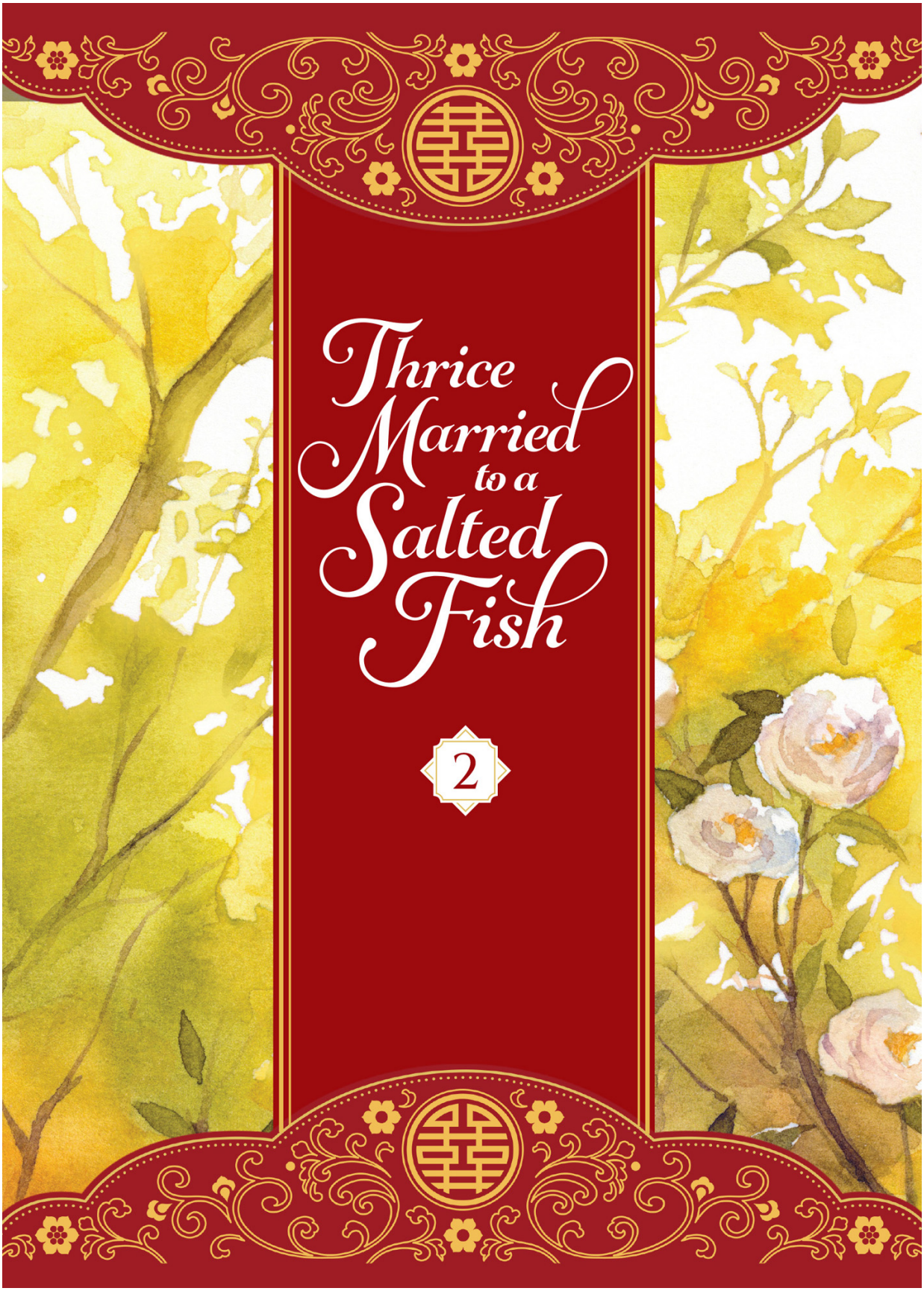
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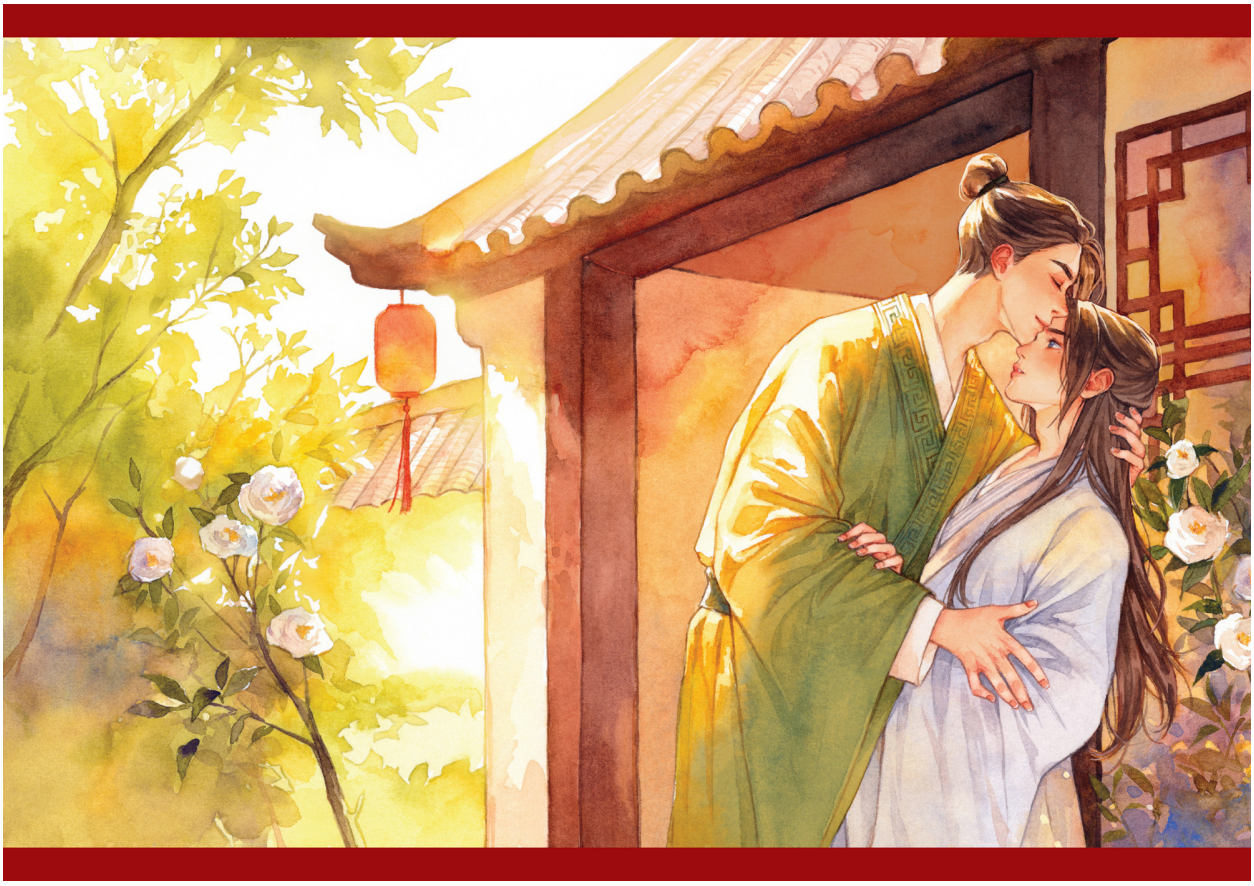

Thrice Married to a Salted Fish

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Chapter 39

THAT NIGHT, Lu Wancheng died in front of Lin Qingyu.

His long eyelashes were lowered over his closed eyes, and he had a peaceful expression on his face; he wore a festive crimson robe on his clean body. Lin Qingyu held one of his hands; his other hand lay on his wheelchair armrest, as if he were just asleep. His head, now unsupported, tilted to the side, just as it used to when he dozed off.

Lin Qingyu reflexively dropped his umbrella and cupped Lu Wancheng's cold cheek in his hand. Now that they lacked the umbrella's protection, snow began to land silently on their hair, faces, and shoulders.

The shop assistant at the funeral parlor had explained what the funeral process would be like. Lin Qingyu should have been able to remember that, but right now, he was a bit disoriented, at a loss. Lu Wancheng was dead—what was he supposed to do?

Huantong, worried, came to the courtyard to check on them. He saw his young master on one knee in front of the wheelchair, his bright-red wedding robes spread out on the snow and his long hair blocking his profile. With one hand, Lin Qingyu was clasping the young marquess's hand, and the other supported his cheek. An open umbrella covered with snow lay on the ground beside him.

They were as motionless as statues.

"Young Marquess!"

Lin Qingyu heard a cry from behind him; it was Huantong.

He'd brought the servant with him from the Lin manor. At the start, Huantong had hated everyone in the marquess's manor, just as Lin Qingyu had. Who'd have guessed that he would cry for Lu Wancheng so despondently in the end? Lu Wancheng had been skilled at endearing himself; he'd won over everyone's hearts in less than a year.

Huantong kneeled in front of the wheelchair, crying until he gasped for breath. His sobs brought Lin Qingyu out of the void and back to reality.

Lu Wancheng was dead. Perhaps he'd been reborn into some other bizarre world, or maybe he was just…gone. Nobody could tell Lin Qingyu the answer, and he didn't know whether it would come to him eventually. Regardless, he'd promised Lu Wancheng that he would watch him leave, then live his life fully.

He'd already accomplished the former.

Lin Qingyu stood up slowly. He'd been in the same position for too long; his vision went dark for a moment, and he almost fell over, but he managed to steady himself.

"Don't cry," he heard himself say. "Didn't you hear what the people from the funeral parlor said? If your tears land on him, you won't dream of him in the future."

"Young Master…" Huantong said in a trembling voice.

Slowly recalling what the shop assistant had said, Lin Qingyu ordered woodenly, "Move him into the house, and cover his face with white silk. You needn't change his clothes—let him wear this outfit in the coffin. Once you're finished all that, announce his death." He paused, then added, "Oh—and carry him on your back. Don't carry him as if he's a princess."

Huantong nodded, still choked up. “What about you, Young Master?”

“I’m going to change.” He couldn’t let others see him in his wedding robes and huadian. Only Lu Wancheng was allowed to see that—nobody else.

***

Lu Wancheng’s death was announced, his corpse was transferred into a coffin, the coffin was guarded… The funeral was carried out in an orderly fashion, with Lin Qingyu taking care of everything himself. The marquess of Nan’an’s household was in a precarious situation, but Lu Wancheng was given a grand funeral.

When news of Lu Wancheng’s death reached the palace, the empress was grief-stricken. The child her younger sister had borne at the cost of her life hadn’t even lived past the age of twenty. The empress thought of her own child, who dwelled in a distant side palace, and how difficult it was for her to see him. She had to watch as other people’s sons basked in their own glory too, which made her even more sorrowful.

In Fengyi Palace, the empress shed silent tears. She couldn’t leave, so she was only able to send her trusted eunuch to the manor with her condolences. The emperor showed sympathy for the marquess by bestowing gifts on the family; he asked that the marquess of Nan’an stay in his manor to rest and recover. The crown prince could take care of the Ministry of Revenue’s business.

When they learned that their grandson had passed away, Duke Wen and his wife burst out crying. They were elderly and couldn’t bear to watch the mournful processions, so they chose a couple of capable stewards to help their grandson’s male wife organize his funeral. They knew that their grandson had cared for his spouse, or he wouldn’t have asked them

repeatedly to help them lighten the burden of the household affairs that fell to Lin Qingyu.

Beyond the Lu family, the mourners were mostly officials and their families. They saw the young marquess's male wife, whom the emperor bestowed the marriage upon, in the mourning hall. He kneeled in front of the coffin in mourning attire with an indifferent expression, never shedding a tear. A large banner of the character for "respect" hung in the back of the mourning hall, and the white funeral streamers fluttering in the wind set off Lin Qingyu's eerie beauty.

Two young masters had passed away in the same month in the marquess of Nan'an's manor, the marquess himself was sick in bed, and the lady had gone insane. This unbelievably bizarre chain of events led many to whisper behind closed doors and conclude that a "husband and wife" should be one man and one woman—that two men marrying each other must be against the will of heaven. That male wife was so beautiful too; he'd been too much for a sickly person. Retribution had come, proving that Lu Wancheng's wedding day hadn't warded off disaster, but invited it instead.

An endless stream of mourners visited during the day, so Lin Qingyu could only find peace at night. Hualu wept as she placed paper money in the brazier; her cries were the most sorrowful of anyone's in Lanfeng Pavilion.

"What's there to cry about?" Lin Qingyu asked her impassively. "Didn't I tell you a long time ago that he wouldn't survive past winter?"

Hualu continued to cry as though she was made of water. "B-but… Young Lord, are you really not sad at all?"

Lin Qingyu paused, as if unsure of his own emotions. "I'm…all right."

Everything had happened according to his expectations. He had known from the first time he saw Lu Wancheng that the young marquess wouldn't live very long. He'd been preparing himself mentally for a year; there wasn't anything to be sad about.

Lin Qingyu stared at Lu Wancheng's spirit tablet,[1] unable to shake the feeling that something was off. After a long period of thought, he finally realized what was bothering him and suddenly stood, his heart thumping in his chest. "It's not right."

"What did you say, Young Lord?"

"His name isn't Lu Wancheng."

Lady Pan and Hualu looked at each other. Thinking that Lin Qingyu's exhaustion had confused him, Lady Pan reasoned with him. "Why not go to your room and rest for a bit, Young Lord? I'll stay here."

Lin Qingyu shook his head, repeating, "His name isn't Lu Wancheng."

"If his name isn't Lu Wancheng, then what is it?" Lady Pan asked helplessly.

"Jiang…" Then Lin Qingyu abruptly stopped speaking. The crying didn't stop, though. The waves of sobs were heartbreaking and annoying.

Lin Qingyu tried to shut out the voices. He could remember everything he saw and heard; he would commit anything anyone uttered to memory.

He kept thinking until everyone was gone and he was the only one left in the mourning hall, but he still couldn't remember the name. He only remembered the nonsense that a certain person had mischievously uttered during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

“I’m Zhu Dazhuang. Aside from ‘Wancheng,’ you can also call me ‘Dazhuang-ge.’”

“All right, all right. I’ll quit teasing you. To be honest, I’m Jiang…”

Lin Qingyu chuckled. The candlelight illuminated his pale, beautiful face as he slowly stopped smiling and returned to expressionlessness.

He sat before the coffin until dawn.

***

Time seemed to fly after Lu Wancheng’s death. In the blink of an eye, seven days had passed.

Legend said that the soul of the deceased would return home on the seventh night to visit his family one last time before reincarnating peacefully. At that point, the family should avoid the coffin and instead meet the deceased in their dreams.

Lin Qingyu didn’t believe such legends; still, he went to bed early. He soon fell asleep, perhaps out of exhaustion.

In his dream, he heard someone call his name faintly. He didn’t recognize their voice, but their tone seemed familiar—casual yet brimming with mirth, just like someone he knew.

Lin Qingyu suddenly opened his eyes. He thought he would see Lu Wancheng, but instead he saw a stranger.

The young man was tall, with broad shoulders and long legs. He wore clothes that Lin Qingyu had never seen before—apparently foreign—and he

had neat, short hair. His features were delicate, his eyes bright yet tired. Though handsome, he looked as though he'd been exhausted for ages.

The young man sat on the floor, leaning against the bed. Seeing Lin Qingyu awake, he smiled. "Qingyu."

Lin Qingyu just stared at him, dazed.

"I didn't lie to you," the young man said, his face propped in his hands. He smiled. "Aren't I much more handsome than Lu Wancheng?"

Lin Qingyu nodded absently.

"Isn't my voice nicer too?"

Lin Qingyu nodded again.

The young man took Lin Qingyu's hand and set it on his abdomen. "Here. Feel my abs."

He wore a thin shirt with short sleeves. Those so-called 'abs' were warm and firm, full of vitality, and definitely real.

Was this a dream? An imaginary "Lu Wancheng"?

The young man stared at him for a bit and then sighed. "We're finally meeting properly, and you're so distracted. If you don't say anything, I'm going to leave."

Panicked, Lin Qingyu grabbed his clothes. "Where will you go?"

"There's only one path in front of me; I can only go forward. As for where that path leads, I don't know. But do you remember our secret code?"

Lin Qingyu immediately recited it.

With a satisfied smile, the young man stood up. "I should leave now."

Lin Qingyu got out of bed, only then realizing that the young man was at least half a head taller than him. “Your name,” Lin Qingyu said urgently. “What’s your name?”

The young man was silent for a moment, then hugged Lin Qingyu around the waist and lifted him high, hooking an arm under his legs. Lin Qingyu, caught off guard, instinctively put his arms around the young man’s neck. The stranger laughed joyfully. “You’re so light. Lighter than I imagined.”

This guy. He wouldn’t let anyone else carry him like a princess, but he would princess-carry someone else at the drop of a hat.

Lin Qingyu wanted to tease him. But—remembering that Lu Wancheng was already dead, and this was a dream—he swallowed his words and asked the most important question: “What’s your name? If you don’t tell me, how can I have your tablet made and enshrined?”

The young man set him back on the bed and got on one knee, as Lin Qingyu had done in front of his wheelchair that day. “If I can come back, I’ll tell you. If I can’t, you’ll be able to pretend I never existed.”

“No. I want you to tell me right now,” Lin Qingyu insisted.

The young man ignored him and turned around to walk into the night, waving with his back facing Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu wanted to chase the figure, but his feet seemed rooted to the ground. He couldn’t move at all.

“Jiang…” *“Jiang” what?*

Lin Qingyu jolted awake to see the bright sky and shadows outlined by morning light. It was as illusory as a dream, and yet it was reality.

Chapter 40

LIN QINGYU SAT QUIETLY on the bed for a long time. For a while, he couldn't separate the dream from reality. He stared blankly at his hands, as if he could still recall the feeling of the young man's abdomen; still, he couldn't remember his appearance.

He only remembered that the young man was taller than Lu Wancheng, more 'cool,' had a nicer voice, and was able to pick him up easily. And… what else?

His memories of the young man seemed to be obscured by a veil. However hard he tried, he could only vaguely recall his visage.

Hualu brought hot water for him to get ready with.

"Did you dream of him last night?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Hualu's eyes turned red again, and she shook her head.

Lin Qingyu slowly pressed his palms together. "In my dream, he came back."

"Did the young master say anything to you, Young Lord?"

Lin Qingyu smiled a little. "He was the same as always. Just talking nonsense." The young man wouldn't even tell Lin Qingyu his name. *How despicable. He should be strung up and beaten.*

But even though Lin Qingyu's visitor had spoken nothing but nonsense, the ambience remaining from the dream was warm enough to make one nostalgic. It was a shame that nothing was left when he woke up.

Lin Qingyu began to pack away Lu Wancheng's belongings, choosing some to be buried with Lu Wancheng's coffin. There were so many things that he asked Hualu to sort through them first to pull out items Lu Wancheng had used in the past year. Older items could be disposed of.

Clothes and headgear he'd worn; bowls, chopsticks, and pitch-pots he'd used; books he'd read, and…birds he'd played with.

Lin Qingyu looked at Lu Wancheng's belongings in a daze.

For the first half of the year, Lu Wancheng's health hadn't been too bad. He'd collected a bunch of odd items and even raised laughingthrushes and myna birds. Later on, his health deteriorated, and the birds got sick too and died. Lu Wancheng had taken care of the birds' funerals himself, humming a cheerful song to see them off, and even asked Lin Qingyu whether he wanted to learn the melody. He'd wanted the funeral-parlor employees to play that song on the suona after he died, while they carried his coffin to his burial place.

At the time, Lin Qingyu hadn't bothered to pay attention to Lu Wancheng at all, ignoring him as he said those ridiculous things; he hadn't even given the young marquess a proper glance. Luckily, though, he had an excellent memory. He could remember a lot of details now despite not having cared about them in the past.

Lu Wancheng had liked to have fun without moving around too much. One day, he'd wanted to know how Great Yu's citizens sheared their sheep. He'd asked the steward to bring a sheep from a farm and cut off all its wool in front of him.

"If I were that sheep, I'd be so embarrassed," Lu Wancheng had quipped, lying in a reclining chair.

That chair was Lu Wancheng's favorite. He liked to lie in it to bask in the sun, rocking as he narrowed his eyes, just like a lazy cat.

Lin Qingyu imitated Lu Wancheng now as he reclined in the chair, picking up the book next to him and flipping through it.

This book, a collection of folk detective stories, had made a deep impression on Lin Qingyu. On the third page, Lu Wancheng had circled the killer's name and added a note, making it pointless to continue reading. Lin Qingyu had written *quit it* back to Lu Wancheng and never looked at the book again. He hadn't thought Lu Wancheng would actually leave *him* a reply.

This man is the murderer.

Quit it.

I ended up messing with Physician Lin?! Sorry! I apologize sincerely.

Lin Qingyu looked at Lu Wancheng's scribbled handwriting, and the corners of his mouth curled upward. Lu Wancheng had always been like this. He upset people until they stewed silently with anger, then quickly and sincerely apologized, making it impossible to be upset with him.

Back then, Lu Wancheng had still been every inch the idle son of a wealthy family, eating and drinking all day and refusing to get out of bed. When had he begun devoting all his energy to scheming?

Lin Qingyu closed the book, feeling a slight pulsing pain in his chest. It felt empty, but he still couldn't cry.

It was fine. Maybe what he lost had been something that hadn't belonged to him in the first place.

In the study, Lin Qingyu found Lu Wancheng's last letter, written a month ago. In it, he stated that he would leave his biological mother Lady

Wen's dowry to his widow. He also wrote that he hoped his grandfather would advise the empress that Lu Wancheng's death should end this warding-off marriage—that Lin Qingyu should no longer be a member of the marquess's household; he should be allowed to return to the Lin manor, free to marry whomever he pleased.

Back when Lady Wen got married, Duke Wen prepared a lavish dowry for her. Twenty years later, it had hardly been touched; it was worth as much as everything the Lin family owned.

After Lu Wancheng passed, Zhang Shiquan settled his accounts with Lin Qingyu. Having taken over the general financial affairs of the marquess's household, Zhang Shiquan transferred a number of the marquess's fields, villas, and shops to Lin Qingyu.

Lu Wancheng had said on their wedding night that, when he died, Lin Qingyu could take his inheritance back to the Lin manor and live happily ever after. He hadn't lied.

There was only one thing Lu Wancheng hadn't sorted out before his death.

"Young Lord, the young marquess wasn't aware of the private salt business in Xu Prefecture. What should we do?"

Lin Qingyu had wanted to use this situation to quell Lady Liang, then force Lu Niantao out of her position after he finished using her. After all, if Lu Niantao really became a concubine and gave birth to a prince, it wouldn't benefit Lin Qingyu. Unfortunately, before he could take action, mother and daughter fell from glory all on their own.

In just a year, the marquess of Nan'an's manor had filled with death, insanity, and illness. The situation was precarious. Now, Lin Qingyu just had

to wait until the elderly marquess had to give up and retire. If worse came to worst, the marquess would succumb to his illness. Lin Qingyu wouldn't need to do anything either way.

How terribly boring.

"Make sure your nose is clean first, then let them make trouble on their own," Lin Qingyu instructed. "Maybe the information will be useful in the future."

"Yes, sir," said Zhang Shiquan.

"Young Master!" Huantong panted as he ran into the room. "The crown prince is here. The marquess asked that you prepare to welcome him."

After the emperor and empress expressed their condolences upon Lu Wancheng's death, Crown Prince Xiao Cheng couldn't ignore the situation either. He was showing the marquess a lot of respect by coming to the manor in person.

Lin Qingyu had known that such a day would come. "Understood. I'll meet with him after I change."

The marquess, supported by Lady Pan, greeted the crown prince at the manor's gate. Lin Qingyu and other relatives stood behind him. The marquess had thought that the crown prince would bring Concubine Lu with him when he came to pay his respects, but unexpectedly, he came alone.

Xiao Cheng and the marquess of Nan'an exchanged a few greetings, and the crown prince expressed his condolences. "I wanted to come earlier to send off my cousin, but I was too busy with government affairs. I couldn't get time away until today."

The emperor was aging, and his health wasn't as good after the chilly autumn hunt. To stabilize the government, the crown prince had to assist him in ruling the country. Xiao Cheng now oversaw the Ministry of Revenue on the marquess of Nan'an's behalf; one could have said that he was in the prime of his career.

The marquess only had a daughter now, and he couldn't help but ask after her, but Xiao Cheng only said casually, "Concubine Lu is ill and cannot leave the palace. I'll burn three incense sticks for my cousin on her behalf."

Lin Qingyu looked behind Xiao Cheng. The only people with the crown prince, aside from the carriage driver, were two guards. Xiao Cheng was normally paranoid and wouldn't be that careless about his own safety—he must have had shadow guards hide nearby.

The marquess invited Xiao Cheng into the manor. The corner of the crown prince's mouth lifted in a smile as he passed Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu looked away first. He wasn't *afraid* to meet Xiao Cheng's eyes, but stewing his eyes in the crown prince's greasy gaze would've wrecked them.

The group reached the mourning hall. As he was Lu Wancheng's widow, Lin Qingyu lit six incense sticks and handed them to Xiao Cheng.

Xiao Cheng took the incense and said in a voice only the two of them could hear, "Xiao-Qingyu, you've gotten thin, but that white outfit looks enticing."

Lin Qingyu's expression stayed blank, as if he hadn't heard him.

Xiao Cheng smiled as he looked at Lu Wancheng's tablet. "I still remember my cousin claiming that nothing would be over until he said so.

But what about now? His body lies in that coffin, and his soul is returning to paradise. And I'm now standing in front of Xiao-Qingyu. Doesn't that constitute an end?"

A thought suddenly occurred to Lin Qingyu. *Yes—nothing would be over unless he said so.*

He gathered his energy and asked, "Have you heard the rumors about me, Your Highness?"

"Rumors?"

"The marquess of Nan'an's household has been plagued by disaster since I married Lu Wancheng. It appears that the heavens disapprove of male wives."

"Did you misunderstand something, Xiao-Qingyu?" Xiao Cheng smiled wickedly. "How could I marry a man? I simply desire that face of yours."

Lin Qingyu looked up. "Your Highness…how are you going to get it?"

"There's no rush." Xiao Cheng bowed slightly three times toward Lu Wancheng's tablet. He appeared to be devoutly burning incense, but he spoke insulting words to the deceased's widow: "Only with patience can a hunter catch the most delicious prey."

Looking down again, Lin Qingyu reached into his sleeve as if to pull something out. A white light flashed before Xiao Cheng, and before the crown prince realized what was happening, a figure appeared out of nowhere to block something in front of him.

Lin Qingyu felt a sharp pain on his wrist as he was pushed back several steps. He'd barely recovered his footing when a long sword touched his neck.

A maid guarding the coffin screamed, but her mouth was quickly covered. The sudden turn of events stunned everyone in attendance—they now saw a young man in fitted black garments in the mourning hall, holding a long sword as he stared at Lin Qingyu murderously.

Compared to Lin Qingyu, the man's appearance and figure were ordinary, and he would have disappeared easily in a crowd. But now that he was visible, if he moved even slightly, he'd spill Lin Qingyu's blood on the spot.

"Shen Huaishi?" Lin Qingyu whispered.

Surprised flashed across the young man's face.

"What is it?" Xiao Cheng said unhappily. "Why did you suddenly come out?"

"Young Lord Lin has a sharp object hidden in his sleeve," the young man said tersely.

Everyone gasped. Assassinating the crown prince would be a crime punishable by the execution of an entire family.

陆晚荻

“Oh?” Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes; he looked menacing. “What stupid thing did Young Lord Lin want to do in front of his husband’s coffin?”

“You misunderstood, shadow guard,” Lin Qingyu said calmly. He took the item out of his sleeve; it turned out to be a woman’s hairpin. “This was the young marquess’s. After he left, I kept it with me, and I’ve developed a habit of fidgeting with it. I didn’t think it would cause such a misunderstanding. Please forgive me, Your Highness.”

Xiao Cheng looked at Lin Qingyu. Everyone else was too afraid to breathe until he ordered his shadow guard, “Get back here.”

The young man put away his sword and lowered his eyes. “I deserve to die for my mistake, Your Highness.”

After that scuffle, Xiao Cheng didn’t stay much longer. Lin Qingyu put the hairpin into the pile of funerary objects so that it could accompany Lu Wancheng during his eternal sleep, lest he have nothing to twirl between his fingers in the other world.

The burial was next. The Lu family’s ancestral tomb was in Lin’an, and Lu Baishuo made a special trip from his hometown to the capital so he could bring Lu Wancheng back. As Lu Wancheng’s widow, Lin Qingyu was to accompany Lu Baishuo to send Lu Wancheng off for the last time.

The end of the year grew near, and Lin Qingyu planned to head south after it arrived. On New Year’s Eve, the marquess’s household didn’t put up any couplets[2] for the Spring Festival, nor did they set off firecrackers or visit relatives and friends. Though Lin Qingyu missed his parents and younger brother, he stayed in the marquess’s manor to celebrate the new year so that his immediate family wouldn’t be subject to reproach.

He gave the Lanfeng Pavilion servants some time off and spent New Year's Eve simply alongside Huantong. While they ate dumplings Huantong had made, a visitor arrived.

Hu Ji was alone in the capital, so he'd inevitably felt lonely when it was time for family celebrations. He'd gone to the Lin manor first, where Lin Qingyu's mother had invited him in for a meal. She'd told him that, if he had nothing else to do, he could go to the marquess's manor—so Hu Ji went, bringing some pastries Lin Qingyu's mother had made.

Lin Qingyu thanked him and asked, "Is my mother doing well?"

"She's doing fine, but she's worried about you. And your father in Yongliang."

Lin Qingyu frowned. It had been a long time since they'd gotten word from Yongliang, and there was nothing new yet. The war in the northwest continued, and General Gu's condition was unknown. They weren't sure when Lin Qingyu's father would be back.

When Hu Ji heard that Lin Qingyu would be heading south, he said worriedly, "The epidemic is raging there. Please be careful, Young Lord."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "I will."

Hu Ji sat for a while, then stood up to say goodbye. Seeing him out, Lin Qingyu looked up to see the lights of thousands of households and a river of stars.

The old year ended tonight, and the new year would begin tomorrow.

After that one evening, the spirit of the young man surnamed "Jiang" never appeared in Lin Qingyu's dreams again.

Chapter 41

ON THE THIRD DAY of the new year, Lin Qingyu brought Huantong and a couple of guards south by boat with Lu Baishuo. It would take at least a month to get to Lin'an and back, so he would have to spend the Lantern Festival on the road.

Though he was going on this trip chiefly to transport Lu Wancheng's coffin, Lin Qingyu nonetheless took measures to ensure that he'd be comfortable. He rented two massive two-level boats, using one specifically to store Lu Wancheng's coffin.

Others were visiting their families and friends for the new year, so boats sailed in and out of the capital. Amid the noise and bustle, Lin Qingyu helped Huantong onto the boat.

Huantong looked out to the horizon and sighed. "A few years ago, when you left the capital for your studies, you were also embarking on a long sea journey. I'm the worst with boats."

This was the same ferry crossing, and he was the same person, but his state of mind had changed. Suddenly, Lin Qingyu remembered that Huantong was prone to seasickness. "Why don't you return to the Lin manor?"

"How could I? I'll go wherever you go, Young Master," Huantong said decisively.

The funeral parlor employee carried the coffin onto the boat. When Lu Wancheng was alive, he wouldn't stand if he could sit and wouldn't sit if he could lie down. He'd only gone out a few times a year, and it wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that undertaking a long journey far away would

have been like a death sentence to him. Lu Wancheng had once said that he would only bring suffering upon himself if he were crazy; he probably didn't expect to be jolted around on such a journey after his death.

When everything was ready, the boatman weighed anchor and sailed away from shore. The chatter gradually died down, and the horizon expanded.

The tide had just receded, so the river was calm and windless, the fog light and the water vast. The morning sun illuminated the water, casting crimson radiance upon half the verdant waters.[3]

"Isn't this view of the river nice?" Lin Qingyu asked as he cleaned Lu Wancheng's tablet and set it back down carefully. "If you can come back, go out for a walk once in a while. Don't be too lazy."

Lin Qingyu wanted to say something else, but when he saw the name "Lu Wancheng" on the tablet, it felt a little surreal. Ever since he'd seen that young man with strange clothes in his dream, it had felt different to face Lu Wancheng's coffin.

Lu Wancheng was dead, but that young man might not be.

As they traveled, the surrounding scenery kept changing, from the plains of the north to the mountains of the south. After a few days, they stopped briefly at the Xunyang ferry crossing.

There was an epidemic in Hong Prefecture, so they wouldn't stop there; instead, they would resupply in Xunyang, a day away from Hong Prefecture.

Lu Baishuo asked Lin Qingyu whether he wanted to go ashore. "I've heard that Xunyang's specialty is osmanthus teacakes. Would you like to try

some?”

Lin Qingyu wasn’t very interested. “No need. I’ll wait for you on the boat.”

“Then I’ll buy some and bring them back,” Lu Baishuo said. “Consider them a thank-you gift for that lamb-goose.” When he was in the capital last, Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng had treated him to that dish. “Ah. I’ve put my foot in my mouth.”

Lu Baishuo felt as though he’d said something wrong. He shouldn’t have mentioned that episode in front of Lin Qingyu, since Lu Wancheng was gone. Reminiscing about the past would only increase Lin Qingyu’s sadness, especially since he was the deceased’s spouse.

Fortunately, Lin Qingyu didn’t react too strongly. “Then please buy extras so Wancheng can have some too.”

Huantong felt incredibly seasick; he wanted to disembark to recover. “Good timing,” Lin Qingyu told him. “Find a funeral parlor and ask them to make a tablet on the spot. It needn’t be too fancy, as long as it’s serviceable.”

Huantong guessed that the young master wanted to make another tablet for the young marquess. “Do you want the same words on it?”

“No, have it read…” Lin Qingyu pondered it, thought about it, and mulled it over once more. “Have them carve ‘Jiang Dazhuang’s Tomb’ on it.”

Huantong was puzzled. “Who’s Jiang Dazhuang?”

“He’s a bastard.” Despite the epithet, Lin Qingyu’s tone was gentle—even a bit tender.

Their boat stopped in Xunyang for half a day, then passed through Hong Prefecture and continued south.

A few days before they would arrive in Lin'an, Lu Baishuo and Huantong fell ill one after the other. They had the same symptoms: first a high fever, then vomiting and stomach pain, and finally blisters. A boatman who had fled from Hong Prefecture knew at a glance that they were suffering from the epidemic.

"Xunyang is just a day or two from Hong Prefecture, and a lot of people there fled from Hong Prefecture. The local authorities check everyone before entry, but it was inevitable that a few of the infected snuck in. So your companions may have contracted it in Xunyang." The boatman covered his nose, keeping his distance from them. "Forgive me for being blunt, sir, but you can only leave things to fate now. Those made of tough stuff may recover on their own, but you can't cure the unlucky, even if gods come to help."

In the cabin, Lu Baishuo and Huantong lay unconscious with fever. They'd only been feverish for a day, but they were already delirious, and blisters crept up their bodies to their necks.

Lin Qingyu wanted to check their pulses, but the boatman stopped him. "Sir, you mustn't! This disease is contagious!"

Lin Qingyu opened the medicine chest Lu Wancheng had given him. "You can just stay farther away."

Hu Ji had already reminded Lin Qingyu of the epidemic, so he'd been somewhat prepared, but he hadn't thought they'd encounter it so quickly. He covered the lower half of his face with cotton gauze and asked everyone else aboard the boat to do likewise. When they reached the next ferry crossing, he requested that herbs be bought onshore for him while he stayed on the boat to care for the patients.

After puking his guts up, Huantong was a bit more clearheaded. Seeing Lin Qingyu preparing to perform acupuncture on him, he said hurriedly, “Don’t come over here, Young Master!”

Lin Qingyu held his shoulders down to keep him from moving. “Do you trust me?”

Huantong nodded, his eyes red. “Young Master, you’re the best physician in the world.”

“Other than Father and my mentor,” Lin Qingyu corrected him. “I’ll try giving you some different medicines. Don’t be afraid—they’re all mild and gentle on the body. Even if they don’t work, they won’t hurt your health.”

“Go ahead. I trust you, Young Master…”

Lin Qingyu applied powder to the two patients, then personally prepared, pounded, and brewed medicine for them. He wasn’t all that confident, so he could only take the process one step at a time, adding or subtracting each ingredient according to the condition of his patients.

When the epidemic broke out last year, he’d exchanged letters with his master, who’d written about his thoughts on the epidemic. Lin Qingyu had gained inspiration from that exchange, so making the cure now came quite easily to him.

Under his careful treatment, Huantong’s and Lu Baishuo’s fevers subsided. Their blisters scabbed over, and there was no sign of further blisters forming. They stayed in bed another two days and seemed fine, aside from the many new scars on their bodies. Luckily, though, their faces were unmarred.

Lu Baishuo was extremely grateful; he insisted that Lin Qingyu was his savior.

"No need to call me that," Lin Qingyu responded. "But if you can, Sixth Young Master, please have someone send a letter on my behalf to Physician Hu Ji in the capital."

In the letter, he wrote down the prescriptions he'd used, hoping to help the Imperial Academy of Medicine.

In light of this delay, they could only celebrate the Lantern Festival on the boat, with relatively little fanfare. When the boatman docked by the gates to the city ferry crossing, Lin Qingyu climbed up to the boat's second level. The river's spring tide rose, and the city fireworks could be vaguely seen, dazzling and reminiscent of that young man's eyes when he looked at Lin Qingyu.

"Young Master! Look!"

Lin Qingyu peered in the direction Huantong had pointed and saw lotus lanterns floating down the river from the city, resembling a cluster of stars. He watched for a while, then asked, "Have we got any wine?"

On the other side of the boat, Lu Baishuo woke from a nap. Not seeing the master and servant from the Lin family, he went on deck to look for them. In the frosty moonlight, he saw a man in white sitting in the breeze. His long hair, which was tied with a silk ribbon, looked like strokes of ink as it flew in the wind. His clothes were like snow, and when he tilted his head back to drink, his face seemed even more beautiful than the moonlight.

For a moment, Lu Baishuo thought that he was looking at an immortal; he stood there in a trance. The boatman saw him in that state and called out to

him, bringing him back to his senses.

"Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu paused, wine in his hand, then suddenly rose and looked back. The moment he saw Lu Baishuo, the light in his gaze quickly dimmed.

Lu Baishuo was a little confused. "Physician Lin?"

Since he'd now learned of Lin Qingyu's medical skills, Lu Baishuo thought the title "physician" was more suitable for him than "young lord." His marriage into the marquess's family just for the sake of luck had been a waste of talent.

Lin Qingyu gathered his thoughts. "Never mind."

***

During the new year's Lantern Festival, the moon and the lights stayed the same.[4]

One third of the agreed-upon time period had passed.

When they reached Lin'an, Lu Baishuo took care of arranging the burial so that Lin Qingyu didn't have to worry about it. When the members of the Lu family branches in Lin'an learned that the male wife from the main family had come, they all wanted to look at him. But Lin Qingyu didn't give them a chance—he didn't even enter the family's ancestral home. He stayed at an inn, not showing up until Lu Wancheng's burial.

He watched expressionlessly as Lu Wancheng's coffin was buried in the family's ancestral graveyard. Meanwhile, the branch family members

cried heartbreakingly, although some of them had never even met Lu Wancheng. In contrast, Lin Qingyu stayed so calm that he invited discussion. It was as if the rumors that he'd brought on his husband's death would be confirmed if he didn't show some sadness.

But it was Lu Wancheng being buried. What did the young man surnamed "Jiang" have to do with it? He'd merely borrowed the young marquess's body for a year. Lin Qingyu had spent a long time taking care of his funeral arrangements, regarding it as repayment of his debt to the young marquess on behalf of "Jiang."

During the spring equinox, Lin Qingyu finally returned to the capital. Lu Wancheng's funeral matters had ended, and it was time for Lin Qingyu to return to the marquess's manor to prepare to separate from the household.

As soon as Lin Qingyu arrived at the manor, Hu Ji came over and excitedly told him two pieces of good news. First, the prescription he'd created to treat the epidemic was effective. After the Imperial Academy of Medicine made some slight improvements, the drug was distributed to Great Yu's nineteen prefectures. Gradually, the court reined in the epidemic, which began to die down.

Second, Gu Fuzhou—Great General Gu on the northwest border—had been on death's door when he suddenly revived. He'd survived the next two days, and in that time, Head Physician Lin had found an antidote for the strange poison from Western Xia. Now that the remaining poison had cleared, Gu Fuzhou could recover.

"I heard that, when General Gu woke up, he regarded Head Physician Lin as his savior and insisted on making him his godfather. Head Physician

Lin refused several times, but it was no use, so he had to accept General Gu as his godson.” Hu Ji laughed. “So aren’t you General Gu’s godbrother?”

Godbrother? For some reason, the term evoked a vague familiarity. In any case, that news was truly fortunate. Lin Qingyu breathed a sigh of relief. “If General Gu is out of the woods, is it time for my father to return to the capital?”

“Yes, he should be returning,” Hu Ji said joyfully. “Young Lord Lin, have you heard that the emperor learned that it was Head Physician Lin’s son—the young marquess’s wife—who came up with the prescription against the epidemic? He’s summoning you to the palace to meet him.”

Chapter 42

A FEW DAYS LATER, Lin Qingyu indeed received orders from the palace; the emperor had summoned him there.

Through the empress, Lin Qingyu and the emperor were distantly related—but since Lin Qingyu had no official title, he could only enter the palace as a commoner.

Hualu picked out a light blue shenyi; the layered robe made Lin Qingyu look as refreshing and elegant as the clear sky after rain. Lin Qingyu recalled the first time he'd entered the palace to thank the empress—before he went there, the young man surnamed "Jiang" had been reluctant to let him go. When Lin Qingyu asked why, he'd said, "I'm afraid that greasy crown prince will notice you. Oh—besides the crown prince, you'll have to be careful of the emperor too. All old men like young and pretty ones…"

He'd been right about the crown prince. Would the emperor also be…?

"I'm not wearing this one," Lin Qingyu said. "Bring over that bright-purple robe."

Hualu was surprised. "Do you mean the one made last year?" She remembered that Lin Qingyu hadn't liked the bright purple color, and Lu Wancheng once said that it was so garish that it hurt the eyes, so they'd had her put it away.

"Yes."

"But you're still in mourning. It would be better to wear something plain," she urged.

“It’s all right.”

Lin Qingyu changed into the purple robes, but his figure and face still stood out. Unfortunately, this was the most he could do. He couldn’t risk being punished for impropriety before the emperor.

Lin Qingyu followed a eunuch into the palace all the way to Qinzheng Hall.

“The emperor is holding a discussion with the crown prince,” the eunuch in charge of Qinzheng Hall said. “Please wait here for a moment, Young Lord Lin.”

The eunuch’s name was Xue Ying. He’d served the emperor for years, and even the empress had to respect him. Lin Qingyu nodded. “Thank you.”

Since Xue Ying had been at the palace for a long time, he’d seen all the kinds of beauties in the Inner Palace. Still, when he first saw the newly widowed Young Lord Lin, he was shocked. Male homosexuality was prevalent in Great Yu by that point, and the emperor’s harem contained multiple male concubines, all beautiful in different ways. However, compared to Young Lord Lin, they were nothing. The emperor had refined taste and preferred a beauty with delicate features, resembling a fully blossomed lotus in clear water. That said, Young Lord Lin was dressed so tackily that only his face held the look together. No one else would have looked as dignified.

“Wait a moment,” the eunuch said—but Lin Qingyu waited more than an hour before Xiao Cheng finally came out. When the crown prince saw Lin Qingyu, surprise flashed in his eyes. “Why are you here?”

“Young Lord Lin’s epidemic prescription has worked extremely well,” Xue Ying explained. “Therefore, the emperor will personally reward him for

his merits."

"Oh?" Xiao Cheng raised an eyebrow and circled Lin Qingyu. "With that face, I didn't expect you to have such talent. That suits someone who caught my eye…" Xiao Cheng leaned in; next to Lin Qingyu's ear, he drawled, "Xiao-Qingyu."

Lin Qingyu took half a step back, successfully avoiding Xiao Cheng's breath. "I hope you'll remain respectful in front of Qinzheng Hall, Your Highness."

Xiao Cheng smiled faintly. "I'm just saying hello to my late younger cousin's spouse. How is that not respectful?"

Noticing that the atmosphere between the pair wasn't quite right, Xue Ying smiled to smooth things over. "Did you hear that Head Physician Lin adopted General Gu as his godson, Your Highness? Having a godbrother like General Gu will be a great blessing for Young Lord Lin."

As expected of palace personnel, Xue Ying had resolved the situation in just a sentence or two. Gu Fuzhou commanded an army of three hundred thousand; he was the leader of the military generals and held great prestige within the army. The young man surnamed "Jiang" had once said that the thing Xiao Cheng most valued was his position as crown prince—though that was before Xiao Cheng fell in love with Shen Huaishi. So long as Xiao Cheng had a brain, he wouldn't squander his relationship with Gu Fuzhou just because he coveted a substitute for the love of his life.

As one might have predicted, Xiao Cheng's gaze dimmed dramatically as he looked at Lin Qingyu. "Gu Fuzhou…" He swiped his tongue over his teeth, then said deliberately, "The Lin family is good at finding friends in

high places. It's a pity that times are different now, and even Gu Fuzhou may not be reliable." After that, he left.

A young eunuch emerged from Qinzheng Hall. "Please come in, Young Lord Lin."

The emperor was over forty, and his health fluctuated. He'd already read memorials[5] for half of the day and discussed things with the crown prince for two hours. At this point, he was pushing himself to his limit. Still, he wanted to meet Lord Lin, who'd devised the epidemic prescription. From one perspective, Lin Qingyu's contribution to Great Yu was comparable to Gu Fuzhou's—one had helped the emperor maintain stability within the empire's borders, and the other had helped him resist outside aggression.

As he rubbed his forehead, exhausted, the emperor saw a young man in a purple robe walk in and kneel in front of him. "Commoner Lin Qingyu greets His Majesty."

"Rise."

Lin Qingyu stood in the dim light, his gaze lowered, as if he were afraid to look at the emperor directly.

When the emperor saw his gaudy robes, he didn't bother looking at Lin Qingyu directly either. "I heard from the Imperial Academy of Medicine that you devised the prescription to treat the epidemic?"

"Yes," Lin Qingyu said, his gaze still lowered. "But it was all thanks to my master's advice that I concocted the antidote quickly."

The emperor thought Lin Qingyu was too young for that. For physicians, experience and qualifications were important. "Where is your master now?"

“He travels the world and has no fixed residence. I am uncertain of his whereabouts.”

“He sounds knowledgeable and undistracted by involvement with worldly affairs. You no less so, of course,” the emperor remarked. “Your father just brought General Gu back from the brink of death, and you’ve saved millions of my subjects. It’s true that distinguished fathers have capable sons.”

“Your Majesty, I am honored.”

The emperor didn’t want to waste too much time on Lin Qingyu. “You’ve made a great contribution to ending the epidemic. What reward would you like?”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes flashed. “I…want the opportunity to walk freely in the Imperial Academy of Medicine, work with famed physicians, read books on medicine, and contribute my humble efforts to Your Majesty’s rule.”

“Oh?” The emperor’s tone was similar to Xiao Cheng’s. “I didn’t think you’d be so ambitious.” He suddenly saw Lin Qingyu in a new light when he learned that the young man didn’t want an official position or money—simply access to the Imperial Academy of Medicine. “You *are* talented—but you married a man. It would be difficult for you to show your face in public.”

Lin Qingyu kneeled again. “The young marquess passed away, and I have fulfilled my duty as a male wife. I hope you will reconsider, Your Majesty.”

“The empress proposed your marriage. A few days ago, she brought it up. Since it is, after all, against custom to marry a man, the marquess’s manor has been plagued by trouble. The empress thought to allow you to return to the Lin manor…” The emperor mulled it over. “Well, one never asks where a

hero comes from. I appoint you a standard seventh-rank imperial physician; you may walk freely in the Imperial Academy of Medicine."

Lin Qingyu bowed to express his gratitude. "Thank you for your generosity, Your Majesty."

Exiting the hall, Lin Qingyu abruptly felt like laughing. He hadn't taken the entrance exam for the Imperial Academy of Medicine last year, but now his dream had already been granted. He didn't have to wait another three years.

It had been so easy that it was hilarious.

Since Lu Wancheng's death, Lin Qingyu's luck seemed to have changed—he'd inherited a fortune, regained his freedom, somehow gained a powerful godbrother, and finally been given entry to the Imperial Academy of Medicine, which he had longed to attend.

Was that young man's soul—wherever it might have been—watching over him…?

"Congratulations, Imperial Physician Lin," Xue Ying said with a smile. "I hope you'll take care of us servants in the future."

Lin Qingyu smiled. "Eunuch Xue, you're being too polite. I'm the one who needs to be cared for."

Now that he'd been made an imperial physician, he could finally get closer to the crown prince in the Eastern Palace.

Following the eunuch out of the palace, Lin Qingyu happened to run into Hu Ji, who was about to return home after his day's work. They walked together. When Hu Ji heard of Lin Qingyu's promotion to seventh-rank

imperial physician, he said happily, “We’ll be colleagues in the future, Imperial Physician Lin.”

“I suppose so.”

“By the way, Imperial Physician Lin, have you heard of an amusing anecdote regarding Great General Gu?”

Lin Qingyu noticed that Hu Ji had an odd expression on his face, as if he wanted to laugh but thought he shouldn’t. “What is it?”

“I just bumped into Xiaosongzi, the eunuch in charge of serving tea in Qinzheng Hall. He’s the one who told me this,” Hu Ji hedged, embarrassed. “It’s not entirely amusing, as the emperor is worried about it now.”

Having been promoted by Noble Consort Chen and the crown prince, Hu Ji now possessed considerable status in the Department of Imperial Physicians. That seniority allowed him to take the concubines’ pulses, diagnose their illnesses, and treat them. However, he acted the same as before, not putting on airs. He did his best to treat anyone who came to him, whether they were a eunuch, a palace maid, a guard, or a nanny.

The lives of servants were the least valuable in the palace. Hu Ji’s initial intention was purely to cure illnesses and save lives, but he’d unintentionally won the hearts of many, so he now had strong relationships with many in the palace. Even those close to the emperor were willing to tell him a piece of news, albeit one that wasn’t confidential.

If this anecdote could be described as “amusing,” it probably wasn’t a huge deal. Perhaps some foolish harem concubine had made a spectacle of herself in order to earn the emperor’s favor. Lin Qingyu didn’t care much, and simply asked again, “What is it?”

“Deputy General Zhao Mingwei of the Western Expedition army sent His Majesty a memorial.”

The Western Expedition army fought Western Xia in Yongliang. Great Yu’s military laws forbade those on an expedition to contact anyone privately. When the situation was dire, they weren’t even allowed to write letters to their families to prevent military secrets from leaking. Violators were subject to military law, regardless of their personal status. The only connection between Yongliang and the capital was the emperor’s desk in Qinzheng Hall. If Lin Qingyu wanted to know his father’s status, he could only rely on Hu Ji to ask Qinzheng Hall’s eunuchs.

“Did something happen in Yongliang?”

Hu Ji knew what Lin Qingyu was worried about. “Don’t worry, Imperial Physician Lin. Under General Gu, the Western Expedition army achieved a great victory over the Western Xia army. The head imperial physician is well. General Zhao submitted a memorial to the throne seeking to impeach General Gu.”

Deputy General Zhao had followed Gu Fuzhou for several years; he’d been loyal to him and looked up to him. Why would he suddenly want to impeach him, especially after they’d won a battle? “How come?”

Hu Ji was unable to hold back from laughing. “He said that General Gu likes to stay in bed too much, and that waking up early for discussions is always a disaster. The generals ended up having to discuss military secrets at the foot of General Gu’s bed. But General Gu thought they were meeting for too long, so he asked them to get ready for bed early, saying it would help them conserve their energy. A few days ago, the enemy attacked at night near the city. General Gu was half asleep—he was holding on to a quilt as he

climbed the city gate and commanded that the army defend the city. Under his leadership, our army won by a landslide, but it was very…unsightly."

"What…?" said Lin Qingyu. "How did His Majesty respond?"

"The emperor hasn't decided how to respond yet, but General Gu submitted his own memorial to the throne. It said that he had a near-death experience with poison and now he sees through the world. His body and mind have changed, and he can no longer fight for Great Yu on the battlefield. Letting him command Great Yu's forces would at best impede military affairs, and at worst harm the country and citizenry. The general is now thirty years old—elderly, according to him—and he does not want to lose his integrity in his later years. He hopes that the emperor will allow him to return to the capital to become a rich, idle man as a reward for his past achievements."

As Hu Ji continued, the story became increasingly ridiculous. He wasn't quoting Gu Fuzhou's original words on the memorial, and no doubt Xiaosongzi had added a personal flair to them as he recounted the incident, but the general meaning was there. "Great General Gu also recommended that General Zhao take over his position waging war against Western Xia. He repeatedly begged His Majesty to allow him to return to the capital immediately."

Gu Fuzhou had joined the army at the age of fourteen, and he had become famous in a battle he'd fought in at age sixteen. Lin Qingyu had only been four then, and one could say that he grew up listening to the stories of Gu Fuzhou's achievements. Though he was a physician now, he had yearned as a child to be a hero making great contributions on the battlefield. There

weren’t many that he admired and respected, but Gu Fuzhou was one of the few.

Yet what Hu Ji had recounted wasn’t something a great general dedicated to guarding the country would say.

Lin Qingyu remained silent for a long time. He couldn’t help but ask, “Are you really talking about Great General Gu Fuzhou?”

Hu Ji said, “The head imperial physician mentioned that if someone survives a life-or-death situation, it’s common for his character to change drastically. Perhaps General Gu really has seen through everything and now wishes to return to the capital for a peaceful retirement.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Perhaps.”

Chapter 43

AFTER RECEIVING IMPERIAL PERMISSION, Lin Qingyu went straight back to the marquess's manor and began to pack his things, preparing to separate from the family.

When he'd married into the household, he brought only robes, medicine books, and Huantong; he would take those away when he left. The rest of what he packed was the inheritance he and that young man had obtained for themselves. Lin Qingyu deposited the silver in a private bank in exchange for banknotes, and beyond that, the antiques, calligraphy, paintings, and deeds for land, shops, and houses, as well as Lady Wen's dowry, were his to take.

Several stewards had been counting the items for over half the day, and they still hadn't finished. There was simply too much. Lin Qingyu watched as servants packed things up in boxes, and a vengeful but pleasant feeling surfaced in his heart.

He wouldn't need so much money, of course. His parents weren't extravagant people, and he didn't have much to pay for. Still, he'd rather give the money to beggars on the street than leave it to the marquess and his family.

That young man had left his own inheritance to Lin Qingyu. Why wouldn't Lin Qingyu take it?

Lady Pan had been working for Lin Qingyu and taking care of the household for a long time, so she was somewhat aware of the family's property. She watched, but remained silent, as Lanfeng Pavilion was almost

emptied and the storeroom's contents dwindled by more than half. This branch of the Lu family had only a few members left, and their bloodline was now practically cut off. The entire manor had only one legitimate master, the marquess of Nan'an. What would be the use of more money? Lady Pan had already dismissed the servants who served Lady Liang and her children, and it didn't cost very much to support the ones who were left. Fortunately, Lin Qingyu didn't empty out everything in the manor—he left them the deeds to some land and shops. With those, Lady Pan could live without worries for the rest of her life.

The day Lin Qingyu left, Lady Pan went to Lanfeng Pavilion to see him off.

"Young Lord—no, I should call you Imperial Physician Lin," she began, smiling. "I hope everything goes well for you in the future, and that you become a famed physician who helps the people, like Head Physician Lin."

That would be a bit of a challenge. Given Lin Qingyu's vindictiveness and selfishness, how could he be the same as his father?

"Thank you," he said. "I've asked Zhang Shiquan to stay in the manor. He could be useful, so if you like, you can have him continue to help manage the household."

Even if he left, Lin Qingyu wanted to keep someone he knew in the marquess's manor. The marquess had served the emperor for years and it was possible he could still be exploited.

Lady Pan might have understood Lin Qingyu's intentions, but she didn't ask anything; she simply nodded.

Since Lady Pan didn't question him despite her intelligence, Lin Qingyu didn't mind working with her. He could see that she'd lost a lot of weight, and that a few wrinkles had appeared at the corners of her eyes. Although he wasn't usually a man of many words, that prompted him to ask, "Do I recall correctly that you were sold into the marquess's household?"

"Yes. After my mother passed, I was alone. Even if I hadn't become a concubine, I would have been a servant in a wealthy family."

"If you want to leave the manor, I can find a way."

Lady Pan paused, clenching the silk handkerchief in her hand.

Seeing that she hadn't agreed immediately, Lin Qingyu guessed her answer. "Or would you prefer to be by the marquess's side?"

"I…" She sighed faintly. "I've lived in the marquess's manor for more than ten years, and this is my home. Where would I go if I left?"

"If I helped you leave, I wouldn't let you be worse off afterward."

Lady Pan shook her head and smiled bitterly. "I am grateful from the bottom of my heart for your kindness, Imperial Physician Lin. But the marquess is my husband. How could a woman leave her husband?"

Lin Qingyu disagreed. "There's no such thing as being incapable of leaving, or of living without, one's spouse." He looked toward the tablet and added quietly, "You'd get used to it."

Just like how he was now doing successfully.

Lady Pan didn't want to leave; Hualu, on the other hand, kneeled and begged Lin Qingyu to take her away. Duke Wen had originally given the maid to Lu Wancheng, and she had no attachments to the marquess's manor.

Lin Qingyu initially wanted her to return to the duke's manor, but she wanted to stay with Lin Qingyu.

"Before the young marquess passed, he was most worried about you, Young Lord. I promised him that I would serve you wholeheartedly and make you eat and sleep well after he left," she said, her eyes red with tears. "Please take me with you!"

Lin Qingyu chuckled. "Did he ask that you do that?"

Had the young man surnamed "Jiang" believed that, once he was gone, Lin Qingyu wouldn't eat or sleep well? He thought too highly of himself.

Hualu nodded. "Young Lord, please take me in!"

"Tomorrow, I'll send someone to the duke's manor for your contract."

Hualu was surprised. "Thank you, Young Lord!"

"Since you're part of the Lin manor now, you needn't call me 'Young Lord' anymore."

Hualu nodded so emphatically, it looked as if she were pounding garlic. "Thank you, Young Master!"

Before he left, Lin Qingyu finally showed the marquess some respect and visited him in person—but the marquess didn't want to see him.

When Lin Qingyu had married into the family the previous year, the marquess of Nan'an had still been the emperor's right-hand man, in charge of the Ministry of Revenue—a glorious time in his career. In just one year, though, he'd become a useless man with white hair and a dead heart. He didn't even know that Lin Qingyu had drained his assets—but if he had known, what could he do?

In the end, Lin Qingyu went to the Lu family's ancestral hall and burned six incense sticks for Lu Wancheng—three on behalf of that young man surnamed "Jiang."

After all that, he left the marquess's manor with dozens of carriages of property, a bunk bed, and that young man's spirit tablet.

Once he'd walked out of the solemn vermilion gate, he turned around and looked at it. The words "Lu Manor" hung high above his head.

He wondered whether the marquess regretted having forced him to marry into the household before Lady Liang went crazy and Lu Qiaosong died. And did Lu Niantao regret humiliating him as she stayed alone in her room every night?

He *wanted* them to regret it. He liked seeing those who'd offended him crying and ruing their deeds against him.

When he left the marquess's manor, Lin Qingyu didn't go straight to the Lin manor. Since the young marquess had passed less than three months ago, and his corpse was still warm, it would raise eyebrows if his male wife had already asked to leave the manor, unwilling to stay sequestered as a widow and even daring to show his face outside. Such a breach of etiquette! Wasn't he afraid his husband's ghost would find him in the middle of the night?

The rumor that male wives were bad luck grew more widespread in the capital. Lin Qingyu didn't care about the rumor itself, but he had to think of his parents and his younger brother, so even though his mother wanted him to return to their manor, he refused.

Before heading south, he asked Zhang Shiquan to buy him a residence in the capital with three courtyards. It wasn't a large residence, but it was

enough for him on his own. The house wasn't far from the palace and the Lin manor, and everything at the property had already been prepared—it was just waiting for him to move in. Zhang Shiquan selected the servants himself. They were honest, hardworking, and came from families that had proven over time to be law-abiding.

As soon as Lin Qingyu entered through the gate, the steward led the servants to shout in unison: "Welcome home, Master!"

"…Master…?" Lin Qingyu echoed.

Huantong couldn't hold back his laughter. "Even after the new year, our young master will only be nineteen. Why are you calling him Master? It makes him sound old."

"After departing from his previous household, he has become the head of his own residence, naturally," the steward explained with a smile. "So of course we should call him Master."

"No need to call me that," Lin Qingyu said. "Just do as you would have before."

Only then did the servants change the way they addressed him: "Yes, Young Master."

Lin Qingyu placed the tablet for the young man surnamed "Jiang" in the mourning hall and had his servants attend to it. They lit incense every morning, afternoon, and evening to burn continuously as offerings.

Everyone walked in and out, unpacking and putting things away. Although he didn't care much about the other areas, Lin Qingyu planned to organize the study and apothecary himself.

As Lin Qingyu placed the books he'd brought on the bookshelf one by one, Huantong ran in to ask him, "Young Master, where should we put the bunk bed?"

Lin Qingyu gave it some thought. "In the study."

If he didn't want to sleep in his bedroom, he could spend the night in the bunk bed. He'd never slept on the lower bunk before.

Hualu walked in, holding a pot of green bamboo. "It's already the third month, but it's still snowing…" she muttered.

"Snowing?" Lin Qingyu paused what he was doing and looked outside. Snowflakes fell from the sky.

On his first day in the house, Lin Qingyu organized his study until late in the evening, simply staying there for the night. He lay in the bottom bunk, listening to the night watchman's distant, muffled signal: one slow and three fast. It was already an hour past midnight.

Another day had passed.

At the end of last year, that young man had passed away on a similar snowy night. Exactly seventy days had passed since then.

Lin Qingyu lifted his hand and touched the wooden board above him. The young man surnamed "Jiang" wanted him to sleep well, but how could he fall asleep on a snowy night like this?

If this "Jiang" were still alive, he would probably sleep better than anyone else.

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The last snow of the season fell for three days. Luckily, when this round of snow ended, winter would be over. Lin Qingyu, wearing the robes of a seventh-rank imperial physician, walked through the snow in a palace courtyard.

He was led by a delicate-looking young eunuch who'd just started working. It was the eunuch's first time seeing such a beautiful imperial physician, and he couldn't help looking behind himself repeatedly.

Official robes in Great Yu were usually dark. Imperial Physician Lin was thin, and he already caught one's eye; thus, in his indigo uniform, he outshone even the harem women.

They were walking casually when the imperial physician called out to the eunuch. Thinking that he'd been caught sneaking glances, the eunuch asked guiltily, "Do you have orders for me, Imperial Physician Lin?"

"Is the Eastern Palace far from here?"

"It's not far, no," the eunuch said. "You'd turn left up there and keep walking for about five minutes."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Thank you."

The eunuch blushed slightly. "Don't mention it, Imperial Physician Lin."

Great Yu prized the medical field. The Imperial Academy of Medicine and Hanlin Academy held equal status, and were located north and west of the imperial palace respectively, separated from the palace grounds only by a wall. Upon completing their studies, students from the Imperial Academy of Medicine could pass that wall and become imperial physicians in the palace.

Lin Qingyu had relied on his successful prescription for treating the epidemic to skip that step and immediately become a seventh-rank imperial physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians.

The eunuch stopped. “We’ve arrived at the Department of Imperial Physicians, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Staring at the golden words *Department of Imperial Physicians*, Lin Qingyu felt a peace in his heart that he’d never imagined.

He’d finally arrived.

Walking east for a few minutes from the Imperial Academy of Medicine would bring him to Qinzheng Hall, where the emperor handled government affairs and took his breaks. At that moment, the emperor was discussing Gu Fuzhou’s request to retire with important officials and the crown prince.

“Gu Fuzhou sent ten memorials in a row asking me to allow him to return to the capital immediately, as if staying in Yongliang one more day would cost him his life. According to Zhao Mingwei, he stayed up at night writing memorials in his tent!” the emperor said, furious. “Gu Fuzhou used to be succinct, but now his memorials blather and blather. What’s going on?!”

The emperor swept his hand through the air, knocking all the memorials to the ground.

The ministers kneeled. “Your Majesty, please calm down.”

Xiao Cheng kneeled too. The floor was now a mess, and he saw that a few memorials had fallen open. At the end of each was the same sentence: “Please allow me to return soon.”

Chapter 44

WHEN GU FUZHOU first sent a memorial asking permission to retire to the capital, the emperor and his confidants had discussed it for a long while. The general had commanded the army for years; he was deeply loved within its ranks, and his reputation preceded him. Some believed that, if that continued, the soldiers would only listen to Gu Fuzhou's orders and not the emperor's—but that since Gu Fuzhou himself had asked to return to the capital to give up his military power, the emperor could reclaim his sway over the army by granting Gu Fuzhou's wishes, thereby eliminating a hidden threat to the throne.

But a different faction, led by Xiao Cheng, scoffed at that. The war in the northwest now stood at a standstill, so allowing Gu Fuzhou to come back would weaken the military's morale and give the enemy leeway to attack. Gu Fuzhou had been stationed at the border for several years and had won countless battles—his name alone deterred some enemies. If he left, the army of Western Xia would certainly attack. Gu Fuzhou had suggested that Deputy General Zhao Mingwei take his place, but could Zhao Mingwei do so?

The emperor couldn't decide, and Gu Fuzhou's resignation memorials went from arriving every five days to every three days. Recently, a request arrived almost every day. At the same time, Zhao Mingwei's impeachment memorials went from arriving every five days to every ten days. After trying to have the general impeached for a while, he suddenly stopped, and even wrote, *Though the general is lazy, he can lead our army to victory. I don't want to pursue this any further.*

As messengers scurried between the capital and Yongliang, the Western Xia army didn't sit around twiddling their thumbs. In a month, their forces lay siege to Yongliang three times. So long as the emperor hadn't approved his resignation, Gu Fuzhou remained the general of the Western Expedition army. Every time the enemy attacked, he cursed and complained a bit, then reluctantly got out of bed, strategized at his sand table, and led his army to victory.

What? His Majesty was wondering why General Gu didn't go to the battlefield to kill enemies in person? Well, of course the general would never have done that. In other words, the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear[6] that the emperor had bestowed upon him was gathering dust in a corner, and his one-of-a-kind Ferghana horse had gotten fat and even received a less-than-stately nickname.

But what was most confusing was that Gu Fuzhou always led the army to victory. He not only won—he won beautifully. On one occasion, he commanded the city's defense as the enemy attacked with its full force; at the same time, he'd ordered a team of elite soldiers to ambush the location where the enemy kept their rations. Nobody could tell how he knew that the rations were stored in a small city only a day's ride from Yongliang. In any case, halfway through their siege, the foe suddenly received news that their food and money had been stolen. They couldn't advance or retreat, and in the end, they'd lost twice as hard.

That was the first time Gu Fuzhou had taken command since the poison was cleared from his body. Everyone thought that he'd recovered, and that their respected General Gu, who worked hard all day long, was coming back. But unexpectedly, Gu Fuzhou only exerted himself for a day before he

came out with “Let everyone rest for two days,” then lay in his own tent for that long.

His generals were confused and heartbroken, but they had to acknowledge their superior’s strategic prowess. At any rate, for soldiers on the field, winning battles and reducing casualties were the most important objectives. Thus, Zhao Mingwei wrote to the emperor, *Forget it—we don’t want to impeach him anymore. Please don’t pursue this matter further, Your Majesty.*

After Gu Fuzhou learned of this, though, he found Zhao Mingwei and said earnestly, “You can’t give up halfway, General Zhao. You may have traveled ninety li out of a hundred, but the last ten are the hardest. Perhaps if you send another memorial, the impeachment will succeed.”

Zhao Mingwei was embarrassed. “General, you’ve led us to victory so many times. Your method is different from before, but it’s good enough, as long as we win. I’m not asking for much.”

Gu Fuzhou looked at him reproachfully, as if Zhao Mingwei had failed him. “You’re being useless. Don’t you want to oust me and take over?”

Zhao Mingwei sighed and bowed. “General Gu, you’re talented and wise. I can’t possibly measure up to you. You should keep your position.”

Steam almost came out of Gu Fuzhou’s ears. “You can’t…do this…to me.”

Reports of victory reached the capital, and the emperor firmly rejected Gu Fuzhou’s resignation. Although Gu Fuzhou said he didn’t want to fight anymore—that he wanted to retire in the capital—he could still win battles if he was forced onto the battlefield. In light of that, he was to stay in Yongliang. The emperor even issued a special edict that Head Physician Lin

was to attend General Gu to ensure his safety and investigate why his personality had changed so much.

As he fought battles unwillingly, Gu Fuzhou sent the emperor memorial after memorial. Half of the emperor's desk was full of those resignation requests. Finally exasperated, the emperor summoned all his ministers to Qinzheng Hall to discuss the matter.

Facing the wrathful emperor, everyone stayed silent; they didn't dare risk offending him.

The emperor frowned and coldly stated, "I've already rejected Gu Fuzhou's requests, yet he keeps asking me the same thing. Is he so arrogant as to think that I can't take him to task?!"

The ministers groused internally. The war was raging in the northwest; it would be a bad time not to humor Gu Fuzhou. But who was bold enough to tell the emperor the truth?

In the end, the crown prince spoke up. Xiao Cheng picked up the memorials from the ground, organized them, and set them back on the table. "Royal Father, please calm down. Gu Fuzhou can still win, so it's better to have him stay in Yongliang. We need talent at such times, and whatever talent we have at hand should be given immense responsibility."

The emperor slammed his fist on the table. "How will he protect the northwest if he's so eager to come home?!"

"Just wait until he actually loses a battle. It won't be too late to replace him then."

The ministers exchanged unreadable looks, and the minister of national defense asked, "If General Gu is desperate to come back, will he lose on

purpose?"

Xiao Cheng smiled. "If he did, and he lost the city and some of his men, how could he hold his head up in the army? When my royal father rescinded General Gu's military power, which general would speak on his behalf?"

The emperor sat slowly down on his throne. "That's a solution."

"Besides, Gu Fuzhou can't be so eager to return to the capital simply to retire," Xiao Cheng said. "Royal Father, I ask that you send the Tianji Guard to investigate the true reason."

The emperor was pleased at this suggestion. "We'll leave this to the crown prince, then," he declared, rubbing his temples.

Xiao Cheng saw this movement. Concerned, he asked, "Do you feel unwell, Royal Father?"

"It's a recurring headache—not a problem."

"Take care of yourself, Your Majesty," everyone chanted in unison.

The emperor waved his hand, signaling them to leave.

When Xiao Cheng left Qinzheng Hall, he called Xue Ying over. "Does my Royal Father often get headaches these days?"

"Yes, he does," Xue Ying replied. "His Majesty is worried about the war in the northwest."

"Have Chu Zhengde take a look at him," Xiao Cheng said.

"I'll summon him immediately."

Chu Zhengde was the deputy head imperial physician of the Department of Imperial Physicians. He was already sixty-five years old and

was the most experienced member of the department. Head Imperial Physician Lin always outperformed him, though, so Chu Zhengde had stayed in the deputy role for ten years.

There were different schools of medicine, just as there were of poetry and swordplay. Chu Zhengde and Head Imperial Physician Lin hailed from different schools and thus had different views. Naturally, they didn't approve of each other. Thus, Chu Zhengde didn't bother acting respectfully toward Head Imperial Physician Lin's son.

When Lin Qingyu arrived at the Department of Imperial Physicians, Hu Ji took him to meet his colleagues and seniors. Whatever they thought of Lin Qingyu, they were polite to his face—except Chu Zhengde, who asked, "Are you the brat who wrote the prescription to treat the epidemic?"

"Yes."

Chu Zhengde stroked his beard, shook his head, and sighed. "If others want to enter the Department of Imperial Physicians, they have to study for decades, take the Imperial Academy of Medicine exam, and then study there for at least three more years. You're a male wife whose husband just died, and yet you entered the Department of Imperial Physicians before you turned twenty years old, with a prescription of unconfirmed authenticity, and without taking the exam… The world is in decline."

"You're wrong, Imperial Physician Chu," Hu Ji objected. "Heroes are always discovered when they're young. When Head Imperial Physician Lin entered the department, he was only twenty. What's more, Imperial Physician Lin's prescription is real—and miraculously effective against the epidemic."

Chu Zhengde scoffed. "Everything must be done step by step. The more miraculous a cure seems, the more we should worry about what harm it

could bring. Even if Imperial Physician Lin's prescription cures the epidemic, I fear it will cause the patients lingering side effects."

"Such side effects would only make themselves known because the patient was still alive," Lin Qingyu pointed out.

Chu Zhengde's face turned dark. He was about to argue further when Xiaosongzi from Qinzheng Hall called out to him, and he left.

"That's just how he is," Hu Ji said. "Don't take it to heart."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "He's been in the deputy position for ten years. I understand why he is how he is."

Lin Qingyu had heard his father mention Chu Zhengde before. The head imperial physician had acknowledged Chu Zhengde's medicinal skills, believing that the deputy should in fact be head imperial physician, given his qualifications. Ten years earlier, however, Chu Zhengde had been ordered to oversee the pregnancy of a concubine the emperor favored. The emperor had few children, so he placed great importance upon the pregnancy of a favored concubine. Unfortunately, she somehow miscarried, despite Chu Zhengde's scrupulous care. Chu Zhengde was subsequently questioned for his negligence. After that, regardless of how skilled he was, he was doomed to occupy the deputy role forever.

Chu Zhengde wore his emotions on his sleeve, so there wasn't much to worry about from him. Rather, those colleagues who appeared kind and cheerful were the ones Lin Qingyu should be wary of.

Since Lin Qingyu had just arrived, he had nothing much to do that day. Finishing his shift at the Department of Imperial Physicians, he left the palace from the north gate and entered the Imperial Academy of Medicine; there, he went straight to the library.

This late at night, the library was empty, save for two guards standing at the door. The emperor had granted Lin Qingyu permission to enter and leave the Imperial Academy of Medicine whenever he wanted, so although it was after curfew, the guard opened the door for him and handed him a lantern. “Call us if you have any orders, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu pushed the door open and entered. Rows of bookshelves came into view; they were two stories high and stretched as far as the eye could see. Supposedly, reading all the medical texts in the Imperial Academy of Medicine’s library would take decades. Lin Qingyu raised his lantern and walked around the chamber twice before he’d located several long-lost works from previous dynasties.

At the end of the library was a locked iron door. Behind it were said to be health records for the imperial family that dated back centuries, starting from Great Yu’s founding. Across from the library was the Qiancao Apothecary, where precious herbs could be found, no matter how rare.

This was part of the Imperial Academy of Medicine, the culmination of all the medicinal knowledge in the world.

Lin Qingyu stayed in the library for two hours, and it was past midnight when he left. Remembering an herb that he couldn’t find in the capital, he went to the Qiancao Apothecary again.

As he entered, he saw a man walking toward him. He didn’t seem to be a student, but his calm steps showed that he wasn’t a thief.

The man noticed him. “Who’s there?”

Lin Qingyu thought his voice sounded familiar. Picking up the strong scent of blood, he knew the man was heavily injured. “Imperial Physician Lin

Qingyu.”

The footsteps stopped.

Lin Qingyu lifted the lantern and looked toward the man. The first things he saw were a black robe stained with blood and a crimson blade.

When he saw the man’s face, Lin Qingyu recognized him. “It’s you.”

Chapter 45

THE BLOODSTAINED and heavily injured young man was Xiao Cheng's shadow guard Shen Huaishi.

Looking closer, Lin Qingyu saw that Shen Huaishi's injuries were more serious than he'd guessed. The most dangerous one was a deep cut in the flesh of his chest; the wound was on the verge of turning black. Lin Qingyu saw other sword wounds of different sizes as well. A normal person injured to such an extent would've passed out from blood loss. Shen Huaishi, on the other hand, could still stand in front of him as if nothing had happened, as befitted a shadow guard from the Tianji Guard.

Lin Qingyu had only met this man once before—in the mourning hall, when Shen Huaishi pointed a long sword at him. Had anyone else treated Lin Qingyu in such a manner, they would've been first on his list of enemies. But the young man surnamed "Jiang" had told him that this nondescript shadow guard would be Xiao Cheng's only weakness.

Shen Huaishi's injuries probably meant he'd been carrying out orders for his master, and that he'd entered the Imperial Academy of Medicine for jinchuang powder[7] to staunch his bleeding. His gaze lingered on Lin Qingyu's face, but he stayed silent; covering the wound on his chest, he tried to walk around Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu said, "You can't treat that injury with a bit of powder, Guard Shen."

Shen Huaishi pursed his lips. "You needn't worry, Imperial Physician Lin."

“A physician’s duty is to save the dying and heal the wounded. You should cleanse the poison from your wounds now, before it’s too serious. Otherwise, the poison will enter your heart meridians, and your martial arts skills will suffer. How could you serve the crown prince then?”

That last sentence seemed to sway Shen Huaishi.

“You’ve been affected by a Five Poisons powder from the western regions,” Lin Qingyu declared. “I know how to neutralize it. Would you like me to try?”

However skilled Shen Huaishi was at martial arts, he was still human. He’d been holding on for a long time, and he was already exhausted; if he refused Lin Qingyu’s help, he might not make it back to the Eastern Palace thinking straight. After mulling it over, he said, “Thank you, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Once they had a light burning in the corner of Qiancao Apothecary, Shen Huaishi took off his top, revealing the new and old wounds covering his chest and back. The sight was terrible.

While Lin Qingyu was traveling during his studies, he had treated injuries for those involved in the world of martial arts. Most had a number of injuries—but compared to those martial artists, Shen Huaishi’s injuries were far more serious. He had probably come close to death several times for his master’s sake.

Xiao Cheng would fall in love with Shen Huaishi—how could he bear to let him suffer? Perhaps, just as the young man surnamed “Jiang” had said, a bastard always disdained those who risked their lives for him, while those who disdained him never left his thoughts.

Lin Qingyu cleaned Shen Huaishi's wound and applied the antidote. "It'll hurt a bit."

Shen Huaishi shook his head—the pain was nothing to him. He peered at Lin Qingyu's jade-like face, which was right in front of him; the teardrop mole at the corner of Lin Qingyu's eye was particularly striking in that light.

Lin Qingyu raised his eyebrows, noticing his gaze. "Why are you looking at me?"

"Imperial Physician Lin, you are as elegant as the moon, with a singular appearance. No wonder…" Shen Huaishi's low voice betrayed his envy and insecurity. "No wonder His Highness cannot forget you."

Lin Qingyu stopped and examined the shadow guard's own face. "Why does the crown prince favor you when you look so plain?"

It was true that Xiao Cheng was a playboy, but he only liked women who resembled Jingchun or true beauties. Shen Huaishi's appearance was ordinary at first glance—and, after more scrutiny, still ordinary. At best, he could be described as having sharp, heroic features.

Shen Huaishi was dumbfounded. "How did you know…?"

"How did I know?" Lin Qingyu glanced at the kiss marks on Shen Huaishi's collarbone. "You don't just have injuries, you know."

Shen Huaishi suddenly rose to his feet, his gaze alert. "How were you able to call out my name at the marquess's manor before, Imperial Physician Lin? I'd never met you."

"I'm not done applying the medicine yet," Lin Qingyu said, avoiding the question.

Shen Huaishi could tell that Lin Qingyu didn't want to answer him. "I'll do it myself," he said indifferently.

Lin Qingyu didn't insist; he got up to stand aside. Some of Shen Huaishi's injuries were on his back, where it was tricky for him to put the medicine on himself. Seeing him struggle, Lin Qingyu sneered. "You're suffering here, and where's the crown prince? Perhaps holding someone else in his arms and enjoying his night."

Hearing this, Shen Huaishi froze. After a long pause, he replied seriously, "He's the crown prince. He can favor anyone he wants—including you, Imperial Physician Lin. You can avoid him for one day, but not forever."

Lin Qingyu smiled. "True."

Shen Huaishi felt that Imperial Physician Lin's smile, in particular, was indescribably charming and rather benevolent. Chances were that only this type of beauty could have inspired such obsession from the crown prince.

After hastily applying the rest of the treatment, Shen Huaishi thanked Lin Qingyu again. "I'll take my leave, Imperial Physician Lin. Be careful on your way back. It's dark."

"When the medicine's effects wear off, come to the Department of Imperial Physicians. I'll give you more."

"No," Shen Huaishi said. "The fewer people who know about a shadow guard's injuries, the better."

"Then I'll find you in the Eastern Palace instead," Lin Qingyu said. He leaned over to blow out the candle, and the apothecary fell into darkness again.

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Lin Qingyu didn't see Chu Zhengde in the Department of Imperial Physicians for the next couple of days. The emperor's migraines had worsened, and he was unable to attend court. Thus, Chu Zhengde was attending the emperor, standing by in Qinzheng Hall.

When Hu Ji mentioned this, Lin Qingyu was pounding medicine. Since he was only a seventh-rank imperial physician, he naturally spent more time making treatments than going out to see patients.

"Does the emperor suffer headaches often?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"He gets them when he's overburdened with government affairs," Hu Ji said. "It's quite serious this time. He can't take care of the country in this state; he can only leave it to the crown prince."

Since the emperor was aging and suffering from chronic migraines, Xiao Cheng would have to start taking over governance more often.

Lin Qingyu put the finished concoction into a medicine chest. "I'm going out for a bit."

Xiao Cheng was paranoid by nature, so the Eastern Palace stayed heavily guarded. Though Lin Qingyu was clearly an imperial physician—he wore official robes and carried a medicine chest—the palace guards still stopped him. "We haven't heard about the crown prince summoning an imperial physician. Please go back, Imperial Physician Lin."

"I'm not here to treat His Highness," Lin Qingyu said.

"You may not enter the Eastern Palace except on His Highness's orders, no matter whom you're treating."

Unsurprisingly, Xiao Cheng was exceptionally cautious, unlike the idiots in the marquess's manor. As Lin Qingyu wondered what he should do, he heard someone call out to him. "Imperial Physician Lin."

Shen Huaishi's complexion looked much better now that he'd recuperated for a while. When they saw him, the guards greeted him and bowed. "Lord Shen."

"Imperial Physician Lin is here on my behalf," Shen Huaishi said. "I'll take him to my room."

"We're satisfied with that, Lord Shen." The guards moved aside for Lin Qingyu to pass.

Obviously, Xiao Cheng had a different attitude toward Shen Huaishi than others. Perhaps what he felt for the shadow guard wasn't yet at the level of romantic affection, but the crown prince at least trusted him.

Lin Qingyu followed Shen Huaishi to the rear hall, where the shadow guard pushed open the door of a room. "Come in, Young Lord Lin."

The simple, plain chamber held no extraneous items. Clearly, the room's inhabitant was quiet and rarely came home. Shen Huaishi poured Lin Qingyu a cup of tea. "I didn't think you'd actually come."

"Why?"

Shen Huaishi hesitated for a moment. "Nobody cares about a shadow guard's injuries."

In fact, Lin Qingyu didn't care either. He'd only approached Shen Huaishi because he wanted to take the life of Shen Huaishi's master. "In that case, it falls to you to care about your injuries instead." He opened the

medicine chest. “You should treat yourself better. Don’t concentrate entirely on the crown prince.”

Shen Huaishi lowered his eyes. “But the crown prince gave me my life.” His gaze fell on the back corner of Lin Qingyu’s medicine chest, and his expression suddenly changed. He grabbed the physician’s wrist. “How do you know the Shen family’s secret sigil?”

Lin Qingyu frowned. “Secret sigil?”

“This.” Shen Huaishi pointed at a strange pattern engraved on the corner, his voice trembling. “How do you know…?”

Lin Qingyu remained silent. He hadn’t known, but that young man named “Jiang” had.

So *this* was why “Jiang” had given him a medicine chest? For Shen Huaishi?

“Let go,” Lin Qingyu said calmly.

Both distracted by their thoughts, they didn’t hear the footsteps approaching the door. With a bang, the door swung open. Xiao Cheng, wearing a dragon-embroidered robe, strode in; as soon as he saw Shen Huaishi clasping Lin Qingyu’s wrist, he narrowed his eyes. “It seems I came at an inopportune time.”

Shen Huaishi collected himself and kneeled in greeting. “Your Highness.”

Xiao Cheng ignored him, letting him continue to kneel. “Why are you here, Xiao-Qingyu? I didn’t seek you out, yet you’ve shown up. I fear you’ve come to the wrong place, however. This isn’t my bedroom.”

“I’m an imperial physician,” Lin Qingyu said. “I’m here to treat Guard Shen’s injuries.”

“Injuries?” Xiao Cheng finally looked properly at Shen Huaishi. “You’re hurt?”

Shen Huaishi kept his head lowered. “I just sustained some minor wounds…through my incompetence.”

“Yes—you’re incompetent.” Xiao Cheng played with the jade ring on his thumb. “Getting wounded over a trifle. What use do I have for you? Why are you still here?”

Shen Huaishi glanced at Lin Qingyu, his lips trembling. “Your Highness, this is my chamber…”

Xiao Cheng stared into Lin Qingyu’s eyes and smiled. “I just want Xiao-Qingyu to…check my pulse…in your room.”

Lin Qingyu clenched his fist, his hand hidden in his sleeve. “You’re idle, Your Highness—was there another victory in the northwest?” he asked lightly.

When he mentioned the northwest, Xiao Cheng thought of Gu Fuzhou and recalled that the beauty in front of him was Gu Fuzhou’s godbrother. A hint of dissatisfaction glinted in his eyes. Right when he was about to speak, a eunuch arrived to tell him, “An emergency report has come from Yongliang, Your Highness. The ministers are all awaiting you in Qinzheng Hall.”

The country’s affairs came first, and Xiao Cheng knew it. He looked at Shen Huaishi one last time and told the shadow guard, “You’re on duty today. Come.” Flourishing his sleeves, the crown prince left.

Shen Huaishi stood up shakily, staring at Lin Qingyu with a complicated expression as he followed Xiao Cheng.

“Please go back, Imperial Physician Lin,” said the eunuch.

Shen Huaishi was right. Lin Qingyu could escape for a day, but not permanently. Only when Xiao Cheng was gone forever could he be completely at ease.

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Xiao Cheng walked into Qinzheng Hall and waved his hand, exempting the ministers from formalities. “What—did Gu Fuzhou try to resign again?”

“General Gu hasn’t mentioned that since His Majesty told him to come back after he’d lost, Your Highness,” replied the minister of national defense. “This time, his memorial says that he intercepted a secret letter from the Western Xia army to Western Xia’s capital. There was a code in the letter, and he suspects it contains military secrets. However, nobody in the Western Expedition army can understand it, so General Gu wants His Majesty to announce it to the public so knowledgeable individuals can hear it and decipher it.”

“Really?” Xiao Cheng was skeptical. “What’s the code?”

The minister of national defense cleared his throat and solemnly read, “‘If odd, change; if even, remain the same.’”

Chapter 46

"'IF ODD, CHANGE; if even, remain the same…' 'If odd, change; if even, remain the same…'" Xiao Cheng repeated this so-called code phrase from Western Xia. For the moment, he had no idea what it meant. "You officials read this memorial a while ago, so if you have any ideas about the code, tell me."

The prime minister thought it over. "'Odd' is the opposite of 'even.' 'Odd' changes, but 'even' doesn't… I think the code alludes to when the Western Xia army will march—they'll move on odd days and stop on even days."

The minister of national defense gave that careful thought. "The word 'change' itself is worth discussing. To me, it implies changes in the formation. Western Xia's army may regularly change its formation as it attacks us."

"The words 'odd' and 'even' are often used in mathematics," interjected the crown prince's attendant. "I think the line refers to a mathematical method."

The minister of revenue disagreed, saying, "How would a mathematical method have anything to do with battles?"

After half a day's discussion, everyone's conclusions were a bit of a reach, and no one could convince the others. Xiao Cheng, calm, watched the ministers argue. When they quieted down, he asked slowly, "Are you done?"

"What do you think it means, Your Highness?" the prime minister asked respectfully.

Xiao Cheng slowly blew on the tea in his cup. “So Gu Fuzhou said that the line is a code from Western Xia—and you believed him?”

Everyone exchanged glances. Lying about military intelligence and deceiving the emperor were serious crimes. Why would General Gu commit them?

Carefully, the minister of national defense asked, “Your Highness, you mean…?”

Xiao Cheng set down his teacup. “Over the past three months, Gu Fuzhou’s temperament has changed. His behavior has become suspicious. A while back, he was throwing tantrums about returning to the capital—and now he’s made up a strange ‘code from Western Xia.’” Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes. “I wonder whether this code is related to why he’s so desperate to return.”

His attendant said, “Now that you mention it, Your Highness, I also think that something is wrong. ‘If odd, change; if even, remain the same’—if that really is a code from Western Xia, how could we spread it? Even in the capital, there are spies from enemy countries. Isn’t General Gu afraid that doing that will alert the enemy?”

“General Gu is eager to win. He’s a warrior, after all. It’s normal that he’d make a mistake,” the prime minister said. “Your Highness, the war in the northwest is at a stalemate. It’s better to believe the line is a code rather than to dismiss it. And in my opinion, that code still needs to be deciphered.”

Xiao Cheng sneered. “Of course it does—after all, I want to know what General Gu is up to. But I won’t figure it out in the manner he wishes.” The crown prince thought for a while. “Forget about spreading the line. Get the scholars from Hanlin Academy and have them decipher it in Qinzheng Hall’s

side hall. They'll stay there until they figure it out. But I don't want others to know about this. Do you all understand?"

Hanlin Academy's scholars were extremely talented, each one the sharpest mind out of ten thousand. If they couldn't decipher it, how could a normal commoner?

The minister of national defense offered his praise. "Your Highness is wise."

Hanlin Academy was west of the palace; the next day, nary a scholar was seen there. Nobody knew what they were doing except for the scholars themselves. Right across from the academy, however, the Department of Imperial Physicians carried on as usual.

Most of the department's visitors were maids and eunuchs from different palaces. Their robes and deportment revealed their master's status in their palace. For example, one of the maids who'd come today wasn't dressed luxuriously, but she was poised and elegant, and the eunuchs of the Department of Imperial Physicians fell all over themselves to welcome her. That maid, Lüyao, turned out to be from Fengyi Palace.

As soon as she entered, Chu Zhengde stood up. "Is the empress ill, Miss Lüyao? I'll pack up and head to Fengyi Palace right away."

"No need, Imperial Physician Chu." Lüyao immediately noticed the most eye-catching of the bustling imperial physicians. "The empress has specifically asked that Imperial Physician Lin take her pulse."

Chu Zhengde whipped his head around and looked fiercely at Lin Qingyu, his beard shaking with anger. "Him? How could a seventh-rank imperial physician who just entered the department possibly attend to the empress herself?!"

Lin Qingyu just looked at Chu Zhengde and picked up his medicine chest. *What an idiot.* The empress definitely didn't need him to take her pulse—he figured she wanted to meet him because of Lu Wancheng.

"I don't know anything about that," Lüyao said indifferently. "Imperial Physician Lin, please come with me to Fengyi Palace."

Chu Zhengde glared at Lin Qingyu's retreating figure, his beard almost smoking in his rage. "That insolent brat!"

Lin Qingyu arrived at Fengyi Palace and greeted the empress. He kneeled on the ground and was about to open his medicine chest when he heard her say, "No need for that. That's not why I asked for you today. Rise." Lin Qingyu stood up, and the empress looked him up and down. Gratified, she told him, "You look very nice in the official uniform."

Lin Qingyu lowered his gaze. "Your Majesty, you are too kind."

"Are you doing well in the Department of Imperial Physicians?"

"Yes. Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty."

"I've read Wancheng's last letter," the empress said, looking sad. "He mostly wrote about you; he implored me sincerely to grant you your freedom. How could I, as his aunt, refuse? Of course, you're skilled in your own right, or you couldn't have entered the Department of Imperial Physicians."

Lin Qingyu didn't really want to talk to the empress, so he stayed silent.

The empress sighed. "Wancheng's spirit in heaven will be relieved to see you now. It's been more than three months since he passed away."

Lin Qingyu's eyelashes trembled a bit. "Yes. In three days, it'll be the hundredth day after his death."

“Time passes so quickly,” the empress said, sorrowful. “I ordered an eternal lamp[8] to be lit for Wancheng in Changsheng Temple. If you have time, you should burn some incense by his altar there.”

Lin Qingyu bowed. “Yes, I will.”

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Two days later, Lin Qingyu had the day off, so he took Huantong to Changsheng Temple.

It was now the fourth month of the year, and the spring flowers were beginning to wither, yet the peach blossoms by the temple up in the mountains were just blooming.[9] Now that the third month was behind them, the long winter was finally over. A certain man had been at the peak of his vitality on this day the previous year.

Lu Wancheng’s tablet was enshrined in Changsheng Temple’s side hall. Lin Qingyu used the eternal lamp to light three incense sticks, bowed three times, and stuck the incense in front of the tablet.

“Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu turned around, and he wasn’t surprised at all to see who was there. “Guard Shen.”

Shen Huaishi still wore all black, a sword at his waist. So long as he wasn’t with Xiao Cheng or in the palace, he looked dignified. “You appear to have expected my arrival.”

“I only guessed that you’d come find me, not that you’d seek me out in Changsheng Temple today,” Lin Qingyu said. “It seems you’ve been following me.”

“I…don’t want to,” Shen Huaishi replied quietly. “But speaking to you in the palace isn’t convenient, so I can only wait until you’re outside. My apologies.” He walked to the eternal lamp and looked at Lu Wancheng’s tablet, then asked, “Is it hard to relieve the pain of losing your husband, Imperial Physician Lin?”

“It’s all right. I just have to keep myself busy.”

Shen Huaishi smiled bitterly. “If everyone could let go of their troubles as easily as you do, Imperial Physician, fewer men and women would be troubled and resentful because of love.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t have the patience to engage in sentimentality with him. “Are you here because of the mark on my medicine chest?”

Shen Huaishi nodded. “That’s the secret sigil for a mechanism that only members of my family who also belong to the Tianyu Sect know of. But now I’m the only one left from the Tianyu Sect…” He gulped. “How do you know of it, Imperial Physician Lin?”

Since the young man surnamed “Jiang” had planned all of this, Lin Qingyu didn’t have anything to hide. “I don’t know. My late husband gave me this medicine chest.”

“The young marquess? How did he…” Frowning, Shen Huaishi sank into silence. “Imperial Physician Lin, where is the medicine chest now?”

“I bring it with me practically everywhere. It’s in my carriage.”

Once Lin Qingyu had asked Huantong to fetch the medicine chest, Shen Huaishi stroked the strange mark with his finger. “Imperial Physician Lin, can I take it apart to examine it?” he asked.

Lin Qingyu hesitated, then replied, “Go ahead.”

Shen Huaishi removed everything from the medicine chest, and after his sword had flashed a few times, countless cracks appeared on the surface of the mahogany medicine chest. With a splintering noise, it broke apart.

Among the wood chips, a touch of green peeked out. Shen Huaishi’s breath hitched as he picked up the object—it was a jade plaque with *Tianyu* engraved on one side.

“How…?” he muttered. “Everyone else in the sect is dead, and their jade plaques were destroyed… Is someone left after all?”

“Another line of small characters is inscribed on the back,” Lin Qingyu pointed out. He could tell from looking at the inscription that it had been written recently.

Shen Huaishi flipped the plaque over. “Sui City, Xu Prefecture…”

“Xu Prefecture, huh?” Lin Qingyu said thoughtfully. Did “Jiang” want to lead Shen Huaishi to Xu Prefecture to find the jade plaque’s owner? “Are you going to go?”

“Of course!” Shen Huaishi said immediately.

Lin Qingyu scoffed. “You’re a skilled shadow guard, yet you’re as simpleminded as a child. Do you trust my late husband that much?” Lin Qingyu understood now why Shen Huashi was so devoted to Xiao Cheng; the shadow guard had been led by the nose all along. “Jiang” had probably done all this because he understood Shen Huaishi’s personality.

Shen Huaishi's chest rose and fell visibly. With slightly red eyes, he said, "If there's even a sliver of hope, I must…must…"

"When are you going to go?" Lin Qingyu asked. "Will the crown prince let you leave?"

The flash of confusion in Shen Huaishi's eyes was quickly replaced by determination. "I'll find a way."

The Tianyu Sect… Lin Qingyu had never heard of it before. Shen Huaishi seemed distracted—it wasn't a good time to ask.

"Let me know when you do," Lin Qingyu said. "I want to go to Xu Prefecture as well to see what my late husband was planning."

Shen Huaishi grasped the jade plaque. "All right," he said hoarsely.

When Lin Qingyu walked out of Changsheng Temple, it was almost dusk. The setting sun looked like a flame; when the flame flickered out, the daylight hours would be over. He was about to board his carriage when a young monk called out to him. "Benefactor Lin."

Lin Qingyu remembered this monk. When he came to Changsheng Temple before with that young man surnamed "Jiang," this monk had led that young man to Xu Junyuan.

Xu Junyuan… A thought struck Lin Qingyu. "Is the imperial preceptor looking for me?"

"The imperial preceptor is still in seclusion. He is not meeting with anyone. However, before secluding himself, he asked me to give you something." The monk took a small brocade bag from his robes. "Here, Benefactor Lin."

Lin Qingyu took the brocade bag and opened it. In it was a note of ten words—a bazi, and a name.

“This is…”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes seemed a little dry from the wind as he saw the familiar handwriting. Shen Huaishi’s loss of composure had amused him earlier, but now his own hands trembled.

On the ninety-ninth day after that young man left, Lin Qingyu had finally learned his name.

He hadn’t imagined that such a name would belong to a salted fish who never seemed to get enough sleep.

Chapter 47

WHEN LIN QINGYU RETURNED HOME, he went by himself into the mourning hall, where there was only one tablet. Lost in thought, he stood there and stared at the three roughly carved characters for *Jiang Dazhuang*.

"You told Xu Junyuan, but not me," Lin Qingyu said softly. "Aren't you a bastard?"

The warm wind blew past him, but nobody responded.

A knock sounded on the door. From outside, Huantong said, "Young Master, Steward Zhang is here."

Before leaving, Lin Qingyu told the tablet, "If you come back on time, I won't scold you."

Zhang Shiquan had been summoned by Lin Qingyu. He didn't know why Lin Qingyu had asked him to come at night, but he reported the state of affairs within the marquess's manor. In just a month, the manor had undergone some significant changes. It no longer felt lifeless, because…Lady Pan was pregnant.

Lin Qingyu hadn't expected this. He'd underestimated the marquess of Nan'an, who—although driven to distraction by the devastation that had befallen his family—had still pushed himself to get up and extend his bloodline.

"After the physician took Lady Pan's pulse and learned she was pregnant, the marquess's illness improved, even without treatment. He isn't bedridden anymore, and I think he'll be able to return to court soon."

“Even if he wants to, there may not be a place for him at court anymore,” Lin Qingyu replied. Getting to the point, he continued, “When you were in Xu Prefecture, you carried out the young marquess’s orders in addition to investigating that private salt business, didn’t you?”

Zhang Shiquan hesitated and smiled. “I can’t hide anything from you, Young Master.”

“Tell me.”

“The young marquess did ask me to track down someone in Sui City and to find a way to get a token from him.”

“Who?”

“I only know that he’s a butcher, and that his alias is Zhu Yongxin. I’m afraid that only the young marquess knew his true identity and name.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Thank you for your hard work. Go to the storehouse and get some medicine for Lady Pan later.”

“Yes, Young Master,” Zhang Shiquan replied.

When Lin Qingyu woke up the next morning, he felt a bit empty. He didn’t know where his heart had gone.

Hualu entered the room; seeing Lin Qingyu sitting up in bed, dazed, she called out, “Young Master?”

“I’m returning to the Lin manor today,” Lin Qingyu blurted.

Not everyone knew that he’d moved out.

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After he got to the Lin manor, he had a meal with his mother, then holed up in the study. Noticing Lin Qingyu's bad mood, his mother stopped Lin Qinghe from approaching his older brother, wanting to play. "Your big brother wants to be alone for a bit."

Lin Qingyu sat alone all day, until the lights were kindled at night. Then Huantong came to remind him, "Young Master, it's time to enter the palace."

Tonight, Lin Qingyu would be on duty for twelve hours in the Department of Imperial Physicians.

"What time is it?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"Around dinnertime."

"Then there's still…" Lin Qingyu stopped talking and gathered his thoughts. "Help me change."

It was late at night, and the palace gates were locked. The imperial physicians on duty at night were usually relatively inexperienced juniors, supervised only by one or two experienced physicians.

Hu Ji was preparing medicine according to a prescription. Unsure of one dosage, he asked Lin Qingyu beside him, "Imperial Physician Lin, would it be better if there was less storax? Imperial Physician Lin…?"

Lin Qingyu came back to his senses. "What?"

Hu Ji set down the prescription. "Is something on your mind these days? I feel like you've been distracted."

Lin Qingyu's hand pressed down between his eyebrows. "I'm fine."

"If you're worried about something, you need to tell me," Hu Ji said sincerely. "I can…"

He didn't finish, because a panicked voice came from outside the courtyard: "Imperial Physician Hu! Is Imperial Physician Hu here?!"

It was a young eunuch, Xiaofuzi, who swept Qinzheng Hall. He had come to the Department of Imperial Physicians because the eunuch he lived with had suddenly fallen ill with intense abdominal pain and vomiting that left him delirious. Virtually nobody cared if eunuchs like Xiaofuzi and his roommate got sick, but Imperial Physician Hu would treat them to the best of his ability.

Imperial Physician Hu packed his things. "I'll be right over."

"You still have to prepare beauty pills for Noble Consort Chen," Lin Qingyu said. "I'll go."

"You would go?" Hu Ji asked in surprise.

Lin Qingyu nodded. He wanted to find something to do; only when treating patients was he briefly at peace.

Xiaofuzi was a little uneasy when he heard this; he only trusted Hu Ji. "You aren't coming, Imperial Physician Hu?"

Hu Ji smiled. "Don't worry. Imperial Physician Lin is more skilled than I am. He won't cause you any trouble. Don't you know that he was the one who devised the epidemic prescription?"

Xiaofuzi's eyes lit up. "Really? Thank you, Imperial Physician Lin!"

"Lead the way," Lin Qingyu said.

He followed Xiaofuzi to the eunuch's living quarters. These eunuchs lived on the other side of the magnificent and solemn palace, seven or eight of them in each of their crowded rooms. Yet the room they arrived at would be considered relatively decent, since the eunuchs employed in Qinzheng

Hall resided there. The eunuchs around the emperor were at least clean and odorless; the eunuchs tasked with the lowest level of hard labor often emitted a strong, sour smell.

Lin Qingyu diagnosed the sick eunuch with food poisoning and prescribed some emetic medicine to make him vomit and empty his stomach. After drinking that medicine for a few days to settle his stomach, he would make a full recovery.

Xiaofuzi thanked Lin Qingyu repeatedly. “I’ll walk you back to the Department of Imperial Physicians.”

“No need.”

“But it’s already midnight, and it can be hard to see the way at night.”

Lin Qingyu paused. “It’s already midnight?”

“Yes.”

The last part of Lin Qingyu’s heart was empty now. The day had passed, and he still hadn’t appeared.

Coming back to life after death or waking up in another body were rare events—Lin Qingyu had never heard of such things before encountering “Jiang.” It had been incredible to experience that once, so how could it happen a second time?

Death was death. After death, there was nothing.

How could he have believed that young man’s words? How stupid he’d been.

Lin Qingyu stared at one spot for a long time. He suddenly closed his eyes, as if he could escape by doing so. Then he picked up his new medicine chest and said, “I…I can go by myself.”

When he walked to the door, the eunuch sleeping to one side rolled over in his sleep and muttered, “If odd, change; if even, remain the same… If odd, change…”

Lin Qingyu suddenly stopped. Lowering his head in disbelief, he stared at the fresh-faced young eunuch.

The eunuch, fast asleep, was oblivious. Still, he kept muttering, “If odd, change; if even, remain the same…”

Lin Qingyu’s pupils contracted, and his body went numb. Not caring about anything else, he grabbed the eunuch’s collar and lifted him up.

The eunuch opened his eyes drowsily and gave Lin Qingyu a blank stare. “Am I dreaming of an immortal…?”

Lin Qingyu’s mind went blank as well, and instinctively, he blurted out the words he’d recited countless times in his heart: “And the sign depends on the quadrant name?”

The eunuch was even more confused. “What…?”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Lin Qingyu didn’t know what to say. He looked down at the eunuch and told him in a trembling voice, “You… achieved your lifelong dream…?”

Had that guy surnamed “Jiang” transmigrated into a eunuch and become a “laogong”[10] as he’d always wanted?

“Imperial Physician Lin?” Xiaofuzi wanted to stop him, but he didn’t think his hands were worthy to touch such a beauty. “Imperial Physician Lin, this is Xiaosongzi from Qinzheng Hall. Do you have business with him?”

Lin Qingyu was dazed for a moment, but reason finally returned to him. If that young man were in the palace, he would have found Lin Qingyu

long ago. It was likelier that someone else had told Xiaosongzi the phrase.

Lin Qingyu's hands suddenly tightened. His face turned cold, and he sternly demanded, "Where did you hear those lines?"

Xiaosongzi could barely breathe, the way Lin Qingyu was pulling his collar. "Wh-what lines…?"

"If odd, change; if even, remain the same!"

"I don't know—I don't know anything," Xiaosongzi said, his face turning red. "I just heard the scholars in Qinzheng Hall chanting it all day as if it were a scripture, so I memorized it unconsciously…"

Lin Qingyu slowly let go of the eunuch, but his mind was a jumbled mess, full of both the shock of regaining what he'd lost and restlessness at the way the truth remained elusive to him.

But now wasn't the time for surprise or anxiety. He needed to calm down and find out more.

Hu Ji had mentioned Xiaosongzi to Lin Qingyu several times; he had received a lot of information from the eunuch. According to Hu Ji, Xiaosongzi was simple and trustworthy, and he returned favors. If what Xiaosongzi said was true, how had the Hanlin Academy scholars learned the phrase?

Lin Qingyu's face relaxed a bit. "What else did you hear in Qinzheng Hall?"

Xiaosongzi took a breath. "That was all. The door to the side hall there has been closed lately, and nobody's allowed out. I can go in, though, because I deliver their meals—oh. I heard them mention Western Xia several times."

"When were they confined to Qinzheng Hall?" Lin Qingyu asked.

“Around three or five days ago. I don’t know what they’re doing either.”

Since the emperor was ill now, and the crown prince was regent, the scholars had most likely gathered in Qinzheng Hall on Xiao Cheng’s orders. So had the lines come from Xiao Cheng? And had he gotten them from Western Xia?

In any case, that “Jiang” was still alive, and he was most likely in Western Xia or on the border of Great Yu. There were constant skirmishes at the border, and he must’ve realized that he couldn’t come back in time and done this instead.

He was still alive, but he hadn’t come to find Lin Qingyu. Instead, he’d used some method to pass their secret code along to Great Yu’s court. That showed that he was either unable to escape his surroundings or needed to hide his identity. He’d let Xiao Cheng learn the code, not because he wanted Lin Qingyu to respond, but to convey the news that he was alive. In light of that, he shouldn’t be exposed, so Lin Qingyu shouldn’t react to the code in front of Xiao Cheng.

Lin Qingyu thought for a long time, and his pounding heart finally calmed. “I owe you a favor for this,” he told Xiaosongzi.

Xiaosongzi smiled shyly. “You’re a friend of Imperial Physician Hu, and you’re willing to treat us eunuchs in our own quarters. We don’t know how to repay you, so we can only tell you insignificant gossip.”

It isn’t bad to be a good person once in a while, Lin Qingyu suddenly thought.

Chapter 48

LIN QINGYU ASKED XIAOSONGZI to keep an eye on the situation in Qinzheng Hall, but Xiaosongzi was just a eunuch who delivered meals. He only ever stayed in the hall for a short time, and the information he could gain was limited.

Lin Qingyu pieced together the clues. The only thing he knew for certain was that the phrase “If odd, change; if even, remain the same” had come from either Western Xia or Yongliang, and that Xiao Cheng had summoned the Hanlin Academy scholars to decipher the code.

He thought about going to Yongliang to find “Jiang,” but when he calmed down, he realized that wasn’t a good idea. Yongliang was a long way from the capital—getting there and back would take a least a month. Even if he did go, the search would be like looking for a needle in a haystack without any help. It would be better to stay in the palace and gather more clues.

Lin Qingyu wasn’t really in a hurry. It was a good thing that young man was still alive; however impossible the situation, as long as he survived, they would meet again. Furthermore, he already understood that young man’s temperament—he was lazy, but when it came to schemes and deception, even Lin Qingyu might not rival him.

He believed that that young man would try anything to get back to him. He didn’t need to go anywhere—he just had to wait where he was.

Lin Qingyu didn’t know what “Jiang” looked like now—whether he was old or young, male or female, beautiful or ugly. That young man had liked to look at beauties; he’d even ranked the handsome men in the capital.

Lu Wancheng's handsomeness had been considered rare in a nobleman, but even Lu Wancheng hadn't been as good-looking as "Jiang." The fact that he'd emphasized that in front of Lin Qingyu when he appeared in Lin Qingyu's dreams seven days after dying meant that he was quite satisfied with his original appearance. If the soul of "Jiang" had transmigrated into an ugly man this time, he would probably be so angry that steam would come out his ears—and he likely wouldn't have the courage to show his face in front of Lin Qingyu.

If he'd turned into a woman, then—knowing his personality—he would probably have accepted it after agonizing for a bit. He'd even look for a husband who would let him lie down and eat all day. In that case…he might as well marry Lin Qingyu.

At that thought, Lin Qingyu smiled for the first time in ages. His eyes were bright, and his cheeks flushed pinker than blossoming peonies. Hu Ji, beside him, felt dazed for a moment as he looked at the other physician.

"What are you so happy about, Imperial Physician Lin?" Hu Ji couldn't help asking.

The corners of Lin Qingyu's mouth quirked up a bit. "It's been a hundred days since my late husband passed. Shouldn't I be joyful that he's moved ahead to his next life?"

"Well…" Hu Ji gazed elsewhere and didn't dare look at him again. Though Lin Qingyu was beautiful, an ordinary person wouldn't be blessed enough to enjoy that beauty. Certain that he wouldn't have that good fortune, Hu Ji didn't even dare think of it.

As they talked, a mocking voice came from behind. "Is it appropriate to chat while you're on duty?!"

It was, of course, Chu Zhengde. Since the empress summoned Lin Qingyu to Fengyi Palace, Chu Zhengde had grown even more displeased with him and even started to throw dirty looks at Lin Qingyu's friend Hu Ji.

Seniority was key in the Department of Imperial Physicians. Lin Qingyu and Hu Ji were Chu Zhengde's subordinates, so they couldn't outright dismiss him. Hu Ji shut his mouth awkwardly. Lin Qingyu didn't bother arguing with the old man; he was in too good of a mood.

Soon, a eunuch from the Eastern Palace came to the Department of Imperial Physicians to say that the crown prince felt unwell and wanted Lin Qingyu to treat him.

Chu Zhengde was upset—one such request was tolerable, but a second wasn't! "I have always taken care of the crown prince, and if not me, it should be Hu Ji! Lin Qingyu isn't very knowledgeable—why would His Highness want treatment from him?" Both the empress and the crown prince had snubbed Chu Zhengde to summon Lin Qingyu—were they trying to humiliate him?!

"It seems that you're very eager treat the crown prince, Imperial Physician Chu," Lin Qingyu remarked casually. "You can take that blessing in my stead, sir."

"Outsiders shouldn't guess at His Highness's intentions," the Eastern Palace eunuch said coldly. "We must simply obey his orders. Are you saying you'll disobey?"

Chu Zhengde stamped his feet. "This is outrageous!"

Hu Ji had a vague sense of the crown prince's attitude toward Lin Qingyu. "Please be careful, Imperial Physician Lin," he said anxiously.

“Don’t worry.” Lin Qingyu slid a porcelain bottle into his sleeve. “The crown prince is wary of General Gu. He won’t do anything to me.”

Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou had never met, and Gu Fuzhou had only recognized Lin Rushan as his godfather because he’d saved the general’s life. But even though Gu Fuzhou was in Yongliang right now, his illustrious military exploits shielded Lin Qingyu, so that—for the moment—Xiao Cheng couldn’t touch him. Even if Gu Fuzhou’s actions hadn’t been intended to help Lin Qingyu, Lin Qingyu owed him thanks in person.

As a precaution, Lin Qingyu asked Hu Ji, “Are you going to Changle Palace to check Noble Consort Chen’s pulse…?”

Once they’d reached the Eastern Palace, Lin Qingyu followed the eunuch to the side hall where the crown prince rested.

“Go ahead, Imperial Physician Lin,” the eunuch said.

Lin Qingyu walked into the hall only to be met with a maelstrom of mess. A wine table was laden with empty wine jugs, and Xiao Cheng lay next to it on his side. He tilted his head back to pour more wine into his mouth, looking greasy and listless.

Lin Qingyu kneeled and bowed to him. “Greetings, Your Highness.”

Xiao Cheng threw the wine jug aside and stood up, wobbling. Looking down, he remarked, “You’re here. You made me wait.”

“I didn’t dare.”

“What do you mean, you didn’t dare? You have great courage,” Xiao Cheng said, staring at him for a bit. His eyes gradually became confused, and he lifted his hand to touch Lin Qingyu’s face. “Your eyes…are beautiful.”

Feeling sick to his stomach, Lin Qingyu turned his head away. Xiao Cheng acted as though he'd been struck—as though he'd only just noticed that the person in front of him wasn't the one in his heart. "Jingchun never looked at me like that," he said, his lips curling upward in a cruel arc. "If you were blind, would your eyes be like Jingchun's? Would they contain only innocence and purity?"

Lin Qingyu was gazing at the crown prince quietly, but he was thinking of countless ways to humiliate him. Xiao Cheng had given him some inspiration—blinding someone seemed like an interesting notion, or even gouging out their eyeballs.

"You've had too much to drink, Your Highness," he told the crown prince. "I'll write you a prescription for a treatment to sober you."

"Look at me!" Xiao Cheng roared.

"If there's nothing else, I will take my leave."

Xiao Cheng abruptly grabbed his arm. "I am the crown prince!" he proclaimed fiercely, his eyes widening. "Even if I force myself on you, what can you do?! You're Gu Fuzhou's godbrother, granted—but would Gu Fuzhou dare confront me over a godbrother he only just gained?!"

Lin Qingyu's eyes darkened, and he chuckled. "Then try it."

He might not be able to escape this, but in that case, Xiao Cheng wouldn't leave the Eastern Palace alive either. It was a pity that Lin Qingyu would have to die with this bastard.

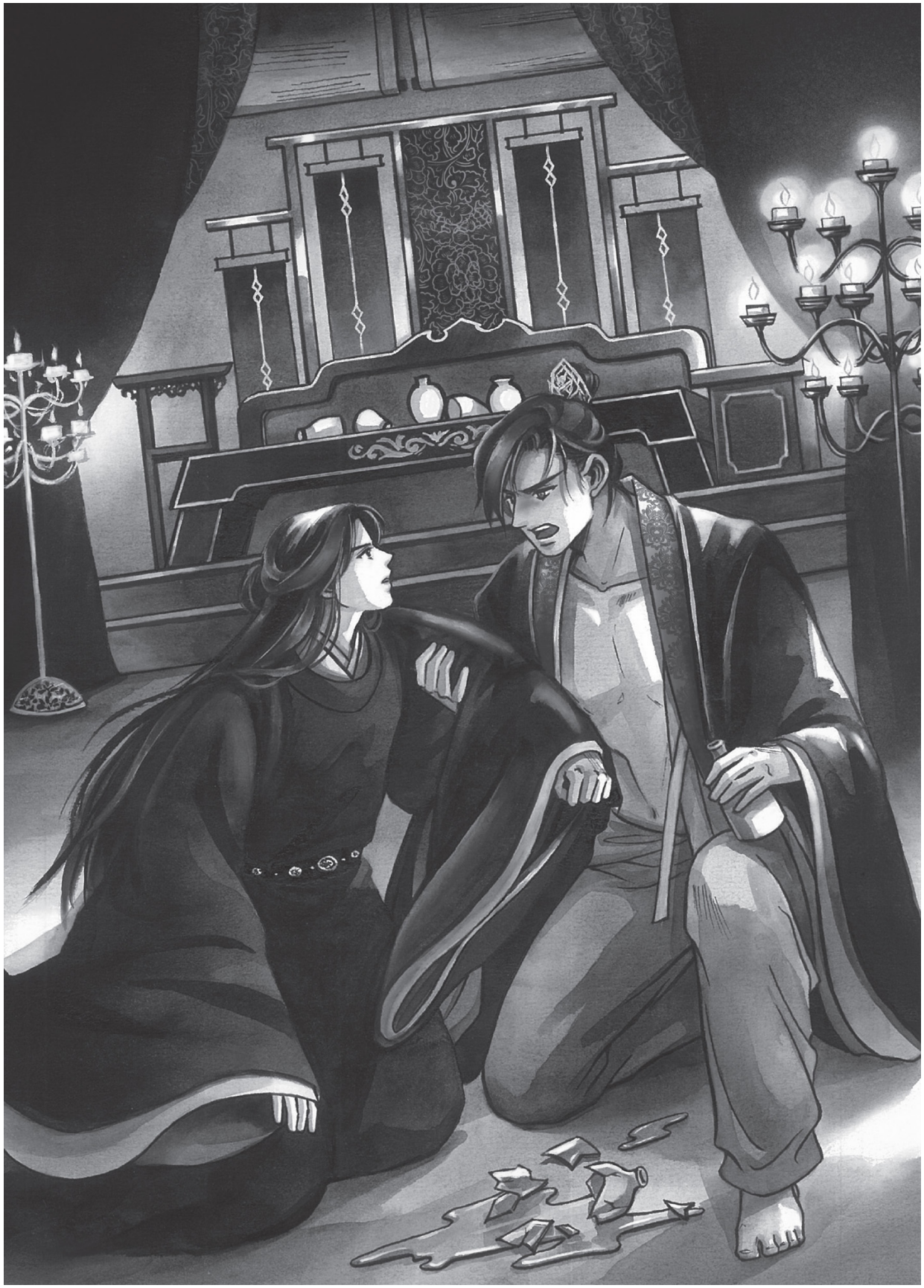
Suddenly, he remembered what "Jiang" had muttered on their wedding night: "Lin Qingyu… The beautiful imperial physician that died in the Eastern Palace?"

So that was it? Was this how his life would end?

Xiao Cheng's gaze locked on to his face. The crown prince didn't let go, but he didn't make another move. Just then, someone walked in—Shen Huaishi.

Shadow guards weren't meant to show themselves unless their master was in trouble. Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes. "Why are you here?" he asked coldly.

Shen Huaishi dropped to his knees with a thud, then prostrated himself. "Please, Your Highness…please spare Imperial Physician Lin."



Xiao Cheng observed both their expressions, then gave a strange laugh. “Say that again.”

“Your Highness, you’re drunk and out of control,” Shen Huaishi said. “You’d never do this sober.”

“You’re pleading that I spare him? I didn’t expect that from you of all people!” Xiao Cheng’s laughter got louder. Sounding as though he didn’t know which of the two he was jealous of, he continued, “I finally understand why Xiao-Qingyu was so kind to you, applying that medicine and bandaging you! Ha ha ha—”

Shen Huaishi’s voice trembled. “I know that today is Princess Jingchun’s birthday. Your Highness, you do this every year…”

“Shut up.” Xiao Cheng’s expression contorted hideously. “Since you want to protect him so badly, why don’t you take his place?!” He yanked Shen Huaishi up and reached past his collar into his robes.

Shen Huaishi’s eyes widened. “Your Highness?!”

“What—are you shy now? I thought you were dissatisfied with me and cavorted with other men under my nose!”

Shen Huaishi shook his head helplessly. “I haven’t…”

Lin Qingyu gripped the medicine bottle in his sleeve tightly, forcing himself to calm down and think about what he should do next. Shen Huaishi was a skilled martial artist, and Lin Qingyu had medicine in his hand. If Shen Huaishi would work with him, they might be able to…

Just then, someone announced outside, “The Noble Consort has arrived __”

Xiao Cheng paused, then asked sharply, “Why has Mother come all of a sudden?”

“When she heard that you were ill, she had an imperial physician treat you. Now she’s come to visit you.”

“She’d never make such a fuss out of nothing.” Xiao Cheng glanced at Lin Qingyu, his eyes gleaming with viciousness. “Did someone exaggerate the situation to her?”

Lin Qingyu shoved the medicine bottle back into his sleeve. “I don’t know,” he said placidly.

Sobering up somewhat, Xiao Cheng looked at Shen Huaishi, who now lay on the ground. A strange emotion flashed across his eyes. “Put your clothes on properly, and have someone make me a bowl of hangover soup.”

Shen Huaishi tidied his clothes and got up, hanging his head. “…Yes, Your Highness.”

Lin Qingyu walked out of the Eastern Palace unscathed. Once he’d found an empty corner, he took a deep breath. He wondered whether he would’ve been so lucky today if Gu Fuzhou hadn’t made Lin Rushan his godfather, or if Lin Qingyu and Shen Huaishi hadn’t met. If not for Gu Fuzhou, Xiao Cheng wouldn’t have hesitated at all. And if Lin Qingyu hadn’t made a point of approaching Shen Huaishi, not only would Shen Huaishi not have pleaded for him, but he would have popped out and put a knife to Lin Qingyu’s neck when the imperial physician attacked Xiao Cheng.

He might have died here in the Eastern Palace at Shen Huaishi’s hands.

It was as if, in the dark, a pair of hands had pulled him clear of his fated demise.

Lin Qingyu looked up at the sky to the northwest and whispered, “Was it you?”

Although they were separated and couldn’t reunite, that young man still protected Lin Qingyu in his own way.

Having survived that ordeal, Lin Qingyu seemed to have lost all his strength. He sank down against the palace wall.

“When will you come back…?”

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That night, Qinzheng Hall was still brightly lit. The ministers gathered with solemn expressions around an urgent report that had arrived from the northwest.

Xiao Cheng’s fingertips tapped the table. He felt restless, and his head ached from drinking.

Soon Chu Zhengde walked in, led by Xiaosongzi. “Greetings, Your Highness.”

Xiao Cheng didn’t beat around the bush. “Do you know of a poison called ‘heavenly arachnid’?”

“Yes, Your Highness. That’s a strange poison from the north. If the victim isn’t given an antidote, the poison will invade his organs, and he will slowly die of exhaustion.”

“*Is* there an antidote?”

“Yes, but it’s very complicated,” Chu Zhengde said, then offered all he knew on the topic. “Thousand-year-old snow lotus must be used as an inducer. It’s pounded to powder with a warm jade mortar, and those can only be found at the Qiancao Apothecary. Then the medicine is given to the poisoned individual immediately after it’s prepared. Only then can the poison be neutralized.”

“You mean only the Imperial Academy of Medicine can neutralize that poison?”

“Yes.”

“I understand. You may go.”

After Chu Zhengde left, Xiao Cheng said in a low voice, “Don’t you find it strange that someone in Yongliang was poisoned by a toxin from the north?”

“The Tianji Guard has confirmed the poisoning, Your Highness,” said the prime minister. “So however the general fell victim to that poison, the most pressing matter is to neutralize it.”

Xiao Cheng looked unhappy and unwilling to compromise, yet he could only grit his teeth and say, “Permit Gu Fuzhou to return to the capital immediately.”

Chapter 49

THROUGH XIAOSONGZI, Lin Qingyu learned that Gu Fuzhou was returning to the capital. Like Xiao Cheng, he felt that this situation was fishy in any number of ways.

From his conversation with Xiaosongzi, Lin Qingyu easily gleaned that Gu Fuzhou had only been allowed to return to the capital because he'd been poisoned by heavenly arachnid. Now that the emperor was ill, whether Gu Fuzhou could return to the capital had depended entirely on Xiao Cheng.

A few months before, Gu Fuzhou had submitted quite a few memorials asking to return to the capital, but the emperor and crown prince had ignored all of them. Now, though, the situation was different. Gu Fuzhou was the heart of the army; however leery the court was of the military power in his hands, they couldn't let poison kill him at such a critical juncture. If they didn't allow Gu Fuzhou to return to the capital, condemning him to die despite the existence of an antidote, the three hundred thousand soldiers he commanded would, at best, lose faith in the court—and, at worst, turn against them.

But why had he fallen victim to heavenly arachnid poison, of all the poisons that existed? If Western Xia was behind it, as they had been last time, then why had they used a slow-acting poison from the north? They could've chosen one that killed immediately after contact—wouldn't that have been a "slam dunk," as "Jiang" might have said?

Xiao Cheng probably had the same skeptical thoughts. But for now, despite knowing that something was up, Xiao Cheng had to let Gu Fuzhou

return to the capital for the sake of the bigger picture.

As far as Lin Qingyu was concerned, it wouldn't be a bad thing for Gu Fuzhou to come back. Lin Qingyu's father would come back too, reuniting their family after a solid half a year.

This time around, Gu Fuzhou wouldn't be returning to the capital because he'd achieved a full victory, but to neutralize heavenly arachnid poison. For stability's sake, the court decided to keep his return secret. Beyond high-ranking ministers, only the Department of Imperial Physicians knew of the general's presence.

It would take ten days to have a missive from the palace delivered to Yongliang, even if it was expedited, and at least another half month would pass before Gu Fuzhou came back. The Imperial Academy of Medicine had to prepare the antidote for heavenly arachnid within that time frame.

After he'd returned from the Eastern Palace that night, Lin Qingyu had suddenly come down with a high fever. He forced himself to write his own prescription and asked Hualu to mix his treatment according to it. Then he ordered Huantong to request sick leave on his behalf from the Department of Imperial Physicians. Afterward, he fell into a deep sleep.

The illness came over Lin Qingyu like a landslide. He slept heavily, not knowing whether it was day or night. As if entranced, he seemed to hear someone calling his name: "Qingyu… Qingyu…"

The voice's tone was relaxed, as if the speaker was smiling.

Lin Qingyu wanted to respond, but he couldn't open his eyes. It felt like a heavy stone was weighing down his body; it was difficult to even move his fingers. His throat felt dry, and he couldn't make a sound.

Oddly, even though his eyes were closed, he could still see the outline of a figure. Then the voice calling “Qingyu” suddenly changed to another man’s voice. “Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu finally forced his eyes open and saw the person next to his bed. Hoarsely he asked, “Guard Shen?”

“Yes, it’s me.” Shen Huaishi handed him a cup of tea. “Are you all right? Your complexion isn’t very good.”

As the cold tea slid down his throat, Lin Qingyu slowly regained his bearings. Because he’d spent part of the day thinking about a certain someone, he’d wound up dreaming about him after falling asleep.

He put the back of his hand to his forehead. His high temperature had subsided into a low fever, and he’d regained some strength. “Why are you at my residence?”

“I heard that you took sick leave from the Department of Imperial Physicians,” Shen Huaishi said awkwardly. “I came to visit you.”

“Coming at midnight without notice to stand at the head of a patient’s bed—is that how you shadow guards would normally go about things?”

Shen Huaishi looked a bit forlorn. “I couldn’t let anyone find out I was coming to your room. I could only resort to doing so in secret.”

Shen Huaishi was so skillful that he might not be discovered even if he broke into the Inner Palace at night, let alone the Lin manor. Lin Qingyu sneered. “No, you can’t let the crown prince find out, or he’ll think that you were forced into a secret affair with me because he didn’t satisfy you.”

Shen Huaishi flushed with shame. “His Highness acted impulsively after drinking. I-I apologize on his behalf.”

Lin Qingyu responded as though he'd heard a shockingly hilarious joke. "*You're* apologizing for *him*? Who are you to him? Do you even have the right to apologize for him, just because you climbed into his bed?"

Shen Huaishi's expression froze. "St-stop it."

"If you don't want to hear it, get out," Lin Qingyu said, his eyes utterly cold. "I'm not interested in seeing someone humiliate himself."

If Shen Huaishi remained stubborn and devoted to Xiao Cheng, how would he help Lin Qingyu? Cleansing and treating Shen Huaishi's injuries had been a waste of time. *How useless he is.*

Shen Huaishi stayed silent for a long time, then quietly said, "Jingchun, His Highness, and I have known each other since we were children. Jingchun was innocent and naive, not versed in worldly affairs. Though she was a palace maid, she was quite delicate and would cry whenever she was wronged. Anytime she did, His Highness comforted her. I wasn't good at that, so I could only practice my martial arts in the Tianyu Sect, thinking that I could protect Jingchun and His Highness forever.

"But then…the king of the North Kingdom took to Jingchun. She didn't want to marry him and cried for His Highness to save her, but the imperial edict had already been issued, so even His Highness couldn't do anything. That is his greatest regret. Since then, whenever His Highness encounters anything related to Jingchun, he becomes violent and moody." Shen Huaishi looked at Lin Qingyu's eyes. "Your eyes are so similar to Jingchun's that His Highness couldn't control himself, Imperial Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu found something useful in that heap of pointless drivel. "The Tianyu Sect…? I thought that all imperial shadow guards were in the

Tianji Guard."

Shen Huaishi hesitated for a moment. "The Tianji Guard and Tianyu Sect both served the emperor. The Tianji Guard operates in the light, while the Tianyu Sect did so in the dark. The world only knows of the Tianji Guard, not the Tianyu Sect—but the two complemented each other. Three years ago, however, the Tianyu Sect was destroyed in a single night. Out of hundreds, I was the only one who survived." Shen Huaishi had recounted the story simply, not mentioning any details.

"Who destroyed the Tianyu Sect?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Shen Huaishi shook his head, seeming unwilling to speak about it any further. "When all is said and done, His Highness saved me. I carried on serving him, joining the Tianji Guard. I thought no one was left from the Tianyu Sect other than me; I never expected to see that jade plaque you had with you." Shen Huaishi's gaze moved slightly. "Sui City, Xu Prefecture… I must go."

"When do you plan on going?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Shen Huaishi sighed. "I can't leave right now, with General Gu returning to the capital."

"Why not?"

"General Gu is surrounded by the Tianji Guard. Everything he says and does from Yongliang to the capital will be within His Highness's grasp."

Lin Qingyu was surprised. "Aren't you afraid I'll leak that information if you tell me?"

Shen Huaishi smiled. "Great General Gu is so wise—how could he not realize that he's being watched by the Tianji Guard? But such surveillance

was a condition set for his return to the capital, so if he wanted to come back, he could only accept it."

"You seem to admire Great General Gu a lot."

"Who in Great Yu wouldn't admire our country's war god? Though he's behaved strangely lately…" Shen Huaishi paused. "Someone's here."

Lin Qingyu looked toward the door but didn't see anything. When he turned back, Shen Huaishi had disappeared. A moment later, Hualu opened the door and saw Lin Qingyu sitting up in bed. Surprised, she cried out, "Young Master, you're awake!"

The window was open, and the wind rustled the leaves. It was as if nobody had been there.

Lin Qingyu wondered whether Xiao Cheng could survive a strike from Shen Huaishi's blade, considering the shadow guard's skills.

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Recovering took Lin Qingyu a long time—it took him half a month to get better—and he lost a lot of weight. He now looked like a weak willow tree in the wind. Just one glance at him aroused a man's protective instincts.

When Hu Ji and Lin Qingyu were on duty together, Hu Ji took care of everything, letting Lin Qingyu rest. However, Chu Zhengde couldn't bear to see Lin Qingyu idle, so the senior physician sent him to the Imperial Academy of Medicine to prepare the antidote for heavenly arachnid.

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In the hottest days of the sixth month, heat waves rolled around, and the valley winds blew. Gu Fuzhou quietly entered the capital one day at dusk.

The reason why heavenly arachnid poison needed to be neutralized in the capital was the inducer in the antidote. The snow lotus from the northern border had to be pulverized with a unique mortar made of warm jade, and the antidote had to be taken two hours at most afterward. Warm jade mortars were rare; only a handful existed, and Great Yu had but three of them. One was at the northern border, and the other two were stored in the Qiancao Apothecary at the Imperial Academy of Medicine.

As soon as news of Gu Fuzhou's return reached the Imperial Academy of Medicine, everyone busied themselves with preparations. Eventually everything was ready, save for the inducer.

"Where's the inducer? Bring it here now!"

"Imperial Physician Lin is in charge of that. Quick—go find him!"

"Where did he go at such a critical moment?!"

In the end, they found Lin Qingyu in the library. When he heard why they'd come, he frowned. "Wasn't he supposed to arrive tomorrow?"

"Who told you that? He returned an hour ago—he'd already back in his residence!"

Lin Qingyu's gaze fell on the sixth-rank imperial physician who'd told him that morning that General Gu would arrive the next day. The imperial physician seemed to feel guilty and afraid to meet Lin Qingyu's gaze.

Lin Qingyu didn't have any energy to deal with him. "Give me an hour. It'll be ready soon."

The leading imperial physician widened his eyes. “You’re only going to begin preparing the inducer now?”

“If you keep talking, it’ll delay things even further.”

When the antidote was ready, Lin Qingyu didn’t stall; he personally delivered it to the general’s manor.

The steward of the general’s manor sweated profusely as he waited for the medicine. When Lin Qingyu arrived, he hurriedly led the imperial physician to the inner courtyard. “General! The medicine is here!”

Without permission to enter the building, Lin Qingyu could only wait outside the door.

A deep male voice sounded from inside, saying with undisguised sarcasm, “This is far too early. Why don’t you just come next year? You can cut down the tree growing on my grave while you’re at it.”

Lin Qingyu hesitated. This was…Gu Fuzhou? The country’s “war god,” Great General Gu? This was…

He heard Chu Zhengde’s voice. “Please forgive me, Great General. I was negligent to trust such an important matter to a seventh-rank officer. When I return, I’ll punish him severely.”

“Have him come in first, General,” another voice said.

Lin Qingyu’s heart skipped a beat—that was his father’s voice. Lin Rushan sounded a bit tired; he probably hadn’t rested much on the way back.

Lin Qingyu gathered his thoughts and walked in with the antidote. His father and Chu Zhengde stood in front of a wide chair in which a tall man sat. The man wore the dark-colored robes of a military official; he had sharp features and bright eyes. His tanned face looked stern at first, with the

bloodthirsty ferocity of a soldier, but the twinkle in his eye dimmed his fierceness significantly, suggesting instead that he was full of youthful laxity.

Heavenly arachnid poison was slow-acting, and the poison hadn't invaded Gu Fuzhou's internal organs yet, so the general looked like a person in normal health as he sipped tea from his cup.

Lin Qingyu's father had always been reserved, but when he set eyes on his eldest son—whom he hadn't seen in half a year—he couldn't hold himself back. "Qingyu?" he blurted.

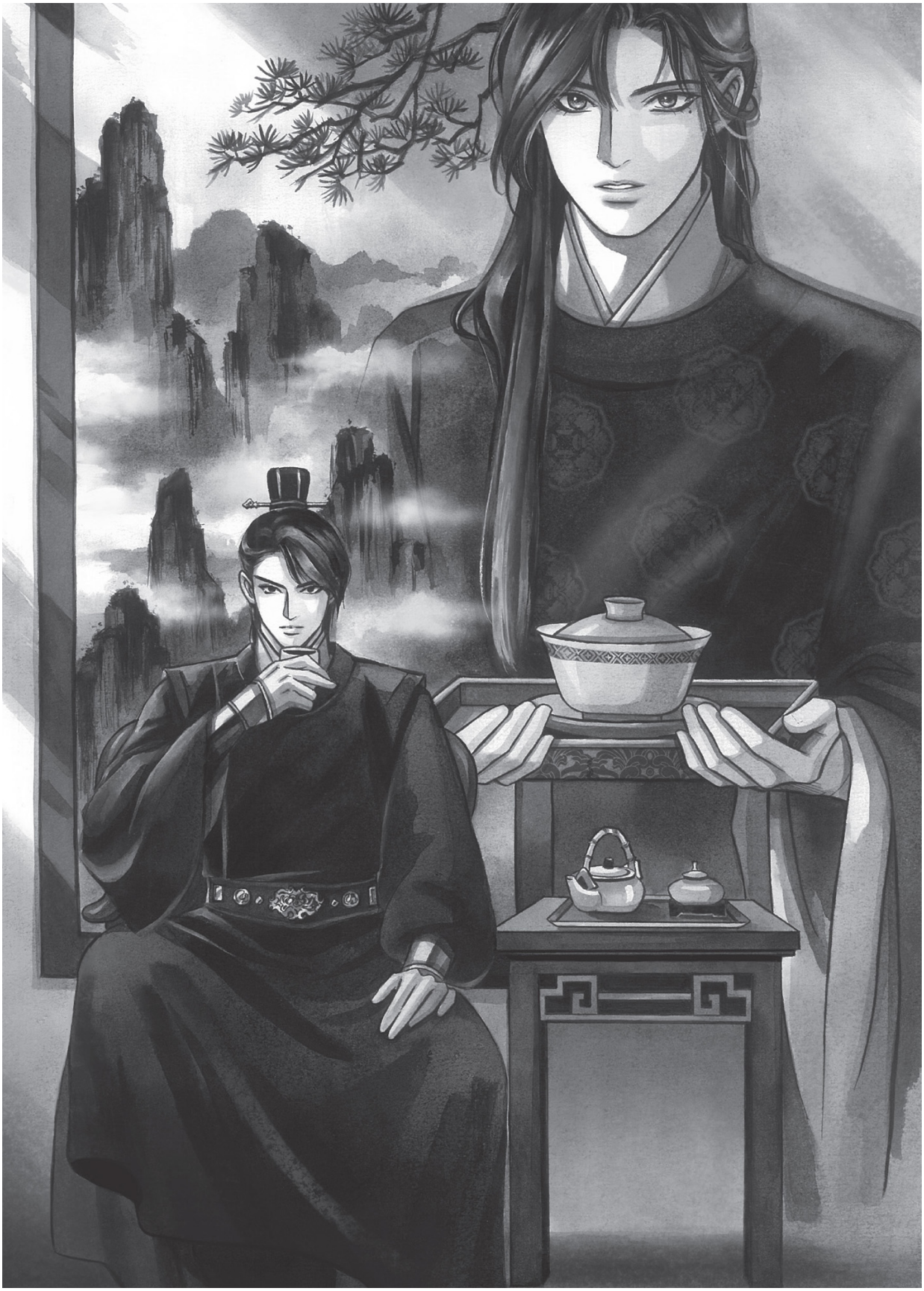
Gu Fuzhou paused and looked up. When he met Lin Qingyu's eyes, his gaze suddenly brightened. Then he seemed a bit nervous and looked away.

Lin Qingyu smiled at his father, then greeted Gu Fuzhou as the man's subordinate. "I, Lin Qingyu, pay my respects to the general."

Gu Fuzhou was speechless. He didn't react for a long time; he probably blamed Lin Qingyu for the delay.

"My apologies for the wait, General," Lin Qingyu said. "Please forgive me."

"It's all right," Gu Fuzhou said without looking at him. He chuckled lowly. "I like waiting."



Chapter 50

LIN QINGYU WAS A LITTLE SURPRISED. That hadn't been the general's attitude earlier. Chu Zhengde was also confused, wondering why the general's disposition had changed so quickly. Lin Qingyu's father had gotten used to General Gu's surprising behavior in Yongliang, though, so he wasn't perturbed. "Qingyu, give the general the antidote."

Lin Qingyu picked up the bowl and handed it to Gu Fuzhou. "Please take this antidote, General."

They were leaning in at rather close quarters. Gu Fuzhou glanced at him for a moment, then immediately whipped his head away, his breathing growing unsteady.

Lin Qingyu could tell that Gu Fuzhou was nervous, but he didn't know why the general was worried about taking the antidote. "General, is there something wrong?"

"…You're too close," Gu Fuzhou said in a muffled voice.

Lin Qingyu set the bowl on the table and stepped back.

"Ah, that's not what I meant… Oh, well." Gu Fuzhou seemed to feel ashamed of his behavior, but he couldn't do anything about it now. He picked up the bowl despairingly and drained it.

"The antidote must be taken daily, and it will take a month to eliminate the poison from your body," Chu Zhengde said. "The Department of Imperial Physicians will deliver the antidote to your residence at this time every day, and you must take it on time."

In other words, Gu Fuzhou could only stay in the capital for a month. When the poison was neutralized, he had to return to the northwest border.

"The question is, who will deliver the antidote every day?" Gu Fuzhou looked around, and his gaze landed on Lin Qingyu. "Can you do it, Imperial Physician Lin?"

Without waiting for Lin Qingyu himself to respond, Chu Zhengde said, "Imperial Physician Lin was late delivering the antidote today. If that happened again, it would hurt your health, wouldn't it?"

Lin Qingyu's father knew that his eldest son wasn't careless and that something must have happened. "The news that the general would arrive today was sent to the Department of Imperial Physicians this morning. Why were you late?" he asked Lin Qingyu.

"Someone told me the general would arrive tomorrow," Lin Qingyu replied.

Chu Zhengde frowned. "Who?"

"Hong Changfeng."

"Then it's Hong Changfeng's fault," Gu Fuzhou said decisively. "Imperial Physician Lin didn't do anything wrong. Even if he did, he's my godbrother, and I'm happy to wait for him."

Lin Qingyu's father couldn't sway the general. "Since the general prefers it, you'll come deliver medicine to his manor every day, Qingyu."

Lin Qingyu nodded. He didn't usually have the patience to run errands, but Gu Fuzhou had done him a favor, so he wanted to repay the general.

It was getting dark; people normally went to bed at this hour. "General, I'd like to return to the Lin manor," Lin Qingyu's father said.

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “Of course. You’ve worked hard, Godfather. Reunite with your family as soon as you can.”

Lin Qingyu followed his father, beginning to leave. When they reached the door, Gu Fuzhou called out, “Qingy—Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu turned around. “Do you have any other orders, General?”

Gu Fuzhou hesitated, then glanced at the Tianji Guards next to him. Slowly, he said, “Nothing. I just wanted to say that you’ve worked hard.”

“It’s my honor to serve you,” Lin Qingyu replied politely.

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “No, it’s *my* honor.”

Lin Qingyu and his father returned home. Lin Qingyu’s mother hadn’t known of her husband’s return to the capital, and upon seeing him, she burst into tears. Lin Qingyu’s parents had been together for years and loved each other immensely. Though she only wept, not uttering a single word, her tongue-tied response was worth a thousand words.

“Daddy!” Lin Qinghe threw himself into his father’s arms.

His father leaned down to catch him, then lifted him high. “You’ve gotten bigger, Qinghe.”

The family of four gathered to eat; it was their first time together in a while. A number of things had happened since Lin Qingyu’s father left the capital six months earlier—Lu Wancheng had passed away from illness; Lin Qingyu had left the marquess’s manor, becoming an imperial physician at the palace. Going forward, he and his father would be colleagues.

At the mention of Lu Wancheng, Lin Qingyu’s father sighed. “The young marquess didn’t live past his twenties in the end. What a pity.”

Lin Qingyu didn't think it was a pity, though. It seemed like a good thing that that young man had gotten rid of that weak, sickly body.

When Lin Qingyu's mother took the sleepy Lin Qinghe to bed, Lin Qingyu asked, "Father, do you know the phrase 'If odd, change; if even, remain the same'?"

His father nodded. "It was circulating within the Western Expedition army. General Gu apparently intercepted a secret missive from Western Xia containing the phrase, and he couldn't decode it, so he reported it to the crown prince in hopes that His Highness would summon the talent of the capital to decipher it. But nobody could figure it out, not even once we were allowed to return to the capital."

Lin Qingyu sank deep into thought. Was that young man really in Western Xia?

Now that their long separation had ended, Lin Qingyu's father had a few drinks, and he became more talkative. "Great General Gu is an enigma."

"Why do you say that?"

His father smiled and shook his head. "After spending some more time with him, you'll know."

Lin Qingyu smiled too. "I was surprised to hear that you accepted General Gu as a godson."

"I refused as firmly as I could at first. He's a first-rank general who saved the country. How could I, a fifth-rank head imperial physician, dare be his godfather? Later on, though, he said that if I acknowledged him as my godson, our family's position in the capital would rise, which would benefit your career. Only then did I accept."

Lin Qingyu nodded. “The general has helped me immensely.”

The next day, Lin Qingyu’s father returned to the Department of Imperial Physicians. There, his first order of business was to figure out what had delayed the antidote. He asked Lin Qingyu and Hong Changfeng to speak to each other, but Hong Changfeng insisted that he hadn’t said anything wrong—that Lin Qingyu had heard him incorrectly. Neither had proof to back up their claims, as no third party had been present at the time. Lin Qingyu’s father had always been fair, so even though he believed his eldest son, he couldn’t arbitrate the matter without evidence. Luckily, the general didn’t pursue it further, so Lin Qingyu’s father just deducted a month’s salary from both the physicians concerned in punishment.

“Chu Zhengde must’ve put Hong Changfeng up to it. Everyone knows they’re master and disciple,” Hu Ji mused.

“Not necessarily. Chu Zhengde has disliked me for a while now. He’s stubborn and old-fashioned, but he would target me openly,” Lin Qingyu said. “Apparently, he’s not the only person between the Department of Imperial Physicians and Imperial Academy of Medicine who dislikes me.”

Hu Ji sighed. “As the saying goes, ‘A tall tree attracts the wind.’ You created the prescription to treat the epidemic, you’re the youngest member of the Department of Imperial Physicians, you’re related to the empress and General Gu, and your father is the head imperial physician. You’re envied, naturally. You should make a habit of keeping a low profile.”

“What I need isn’t to keep a low profile, but for these idiots to stop provoking me,” Lin Qingyu said coldly.

After dinner, Lin Qingyu again prepared the antidote at the Imperial Academy of Medicine and delivered it to the general’s manor. The steward

there was named Yuan Yin. Gu Fuzhou was normally away from the residence, and he had no parents or wife, so Yuan Yin normally took care of everything there.

Knowing that Lin Qingyu would deliver the medicine, Yuan Yin started waiting at the door early. “The general is enjoying the cool air in the rear courtyard,” he told Lin Qingyu respectfully. “Please follow me, Imperial Physician Lin.”

The summer was hot, and the cicadas screamed relentlessly. A handsome, tall man reclined in a rocking chair with his eyes closed, moving slowly forward and back. He was so tall that his long legs barely fit in the chair; he had to bend them. Two servants sat to either side of the general, fanning him with leaves. Lin Qingyu found Gu Fuzhou’s lazy, comfortable appearance somewhat familiar.

Behind the general stood two guards with swords. They didn’t look like military generals who’d been in battle; rather, they seemed similar to Shen Huaishi. If Lin Qingyu’s guess was correct, they were members of the Tianji Guard. Xiao Cheng had asked the guards to follow Gu Fuzhou—nominally to protect the general, but everyone knew the crown prince’s real intentions.

Yuan Yin stepped forward. “Imperial Physician Lin is here with the antidote, General.”

The chair stopped rocking, and Gu Fuzhou stood. He seemed less nervous than last time. Walking to Lin Qingyu, he lowered his head and said, “You’re here.”

Lin Qingyu was by no means short, but in front of Gu Fuzhou, he seemed as petite as a woman. His chin only reached Gu Fuzhou’s shoulder.

The mighty general was worthy of being nicknamed Great Yu's "war god."

"General, it's time for you to take the antidote," Lin Qingyu informed him.

Gu Fuzhou drank it, looked up, and sighed. "The moonlight's so beautiful tonight. If you have nothing else to do this evening, Imperial Physician Lin, why not join me in drinking and snacking, then enjoying the moon?"

Lin Qingyu hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you for the invitation, General."

Gu Fuzhou smiled. When he wasn't doing that, his face looked stern, but the smile didn't look out of place on his face. It made him look much younger too.

Gu Fuzhou ordered Yuan Yin to serve them refreshments, but Lin Qingyu reminded him, "General, it's not appropriate for you to drink right now."

"I won't drink, but you can," Gu Fuzhou said, pouring a cup of wine for Lin Qingyu. He smiled, moonlight hidden in his eyes, as Lin Qingyu took a sip.

Lin Qingyu frowned, finding something about this scene familiar. "Why are you looking at me like that, General?"

Gu Fuzhou coughed lightly. "I heard that you just experienced the pain of losing your husband. You don't seem very sad, though."

"He has already passed," Lin Qingyu said calmly, "and the living should look toward the future."

“Yes, it’s better not to be sad. Sadness is unhealthy.” Gu Fuzhou paused, then continued, “Imperial Physician Lin, have you heard the phrase, ‘If odd, change; if even, remain the same’?”

At that question, the guards looked over at them.

“I haven’t.” Lin Qingyu couldn’t reveal his true intentions, since Xiao Cheng hadn’t made the phrase public.

Gu Fuzhou raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Really? That’s interesting.” He glanced at the two guards and said vaguely, “Well, this isn’t a good time.”

“What do you mean, General?”

Gu Fuzhou changed the subject. “Has the delay yesterday been investigated?”

Lin Qingyu briefly explained what had happened. When Gu Fuzhou learned that he’d been fined one month’s salary, he smiled. “Then you must remember this grudge and repay it tenfold in the future.”

The sense of familiarity Lin Qingyu felt strengthened. He stared at Gu Fuzhou for a long time, then slowly said, “I will.”

After they’d watched the moon for an hour, Lin Qingyu got up and said goodbye.

Gu Fuzhou touched his stomach. “I should get up too—move around, sweat a little.”

That feeling of familiarity instantly disappeared. If this were that young man, he’d never move around and make himself break a sweat in the summer.

“The poison hasn’t been neutralized yet, General. You mustn’t exercise too much.”

Gu Fuzhou looked dismayed. “I’m old now. It’s not like when I was seventeen or eighteen—back then, however much I ate or slept, I didn’t gain weight. I don’t want to move around, but I don’t want to get fat at my age either.” He seemed to think of something, and he grinned. “Want to see my normal training routine, Godbrother?”

In truth, Lin Qingyu didn’t really want to. But thinking of how Gu Fuzhou had helped him, he ended up nodding.

Gu Fuzhou’s sense of personal heroism skyrocketed. “It’s time to show you my true strength. Come, come—I’ll take you to my training ground.”

The training ground was lit with torches, but it still wasn’t as bright as in the daytime. “Why not practice during the day?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“It’s too sunny. Only a fool would practice then.”

Lin Qingyu was puzzled. Why would a man who’d fought outdoors for years be wary of a sunny day?

Gu Fuzhou walked to a stone dumbbell. “This dumbbell should be as heavy as you.”

“…Oh,” said Lin Qingyu.

“Imperial Physician Lin, please watch me.” Gu Fuzhou stretched a little, squatted, and lifted the stone dumbbell with one hand.

Lin Qingyu applauded him respectfully. “Mighty strength, General.”

“Keep watching, keep watching.” The general took a deep breath and raised the dumbbell above his head. “How about it?”

“Very powerful.”

Gu Fuzhou smiled and threw the dumbbell to the ground. “Aren’t I

much better than your late husband?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Do you prefer my physique to his?"

Lin Qingyu's tone cooled a bit. "You have your own merits, General, but I prefer my late husband's."

Gu Fuzhou's smile froze. "Wait. What was so good about a sickly man like him?"

Lin Qingyu lowered his gaze. "If you have no other orders, General, I'll take my leave now."

Gu Fuzhou smiled again. "Hey, what's the matter, Godbrother? Why are you upset now? Let's not talk about him anymore. How about, as an apology, I break a brick with my bare hands?"

Lin Qingyu was rendered speechless.

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Just like that, half a month had passed. Lin Qingyu continued to go to the general's residence to deliver the antidote. He understood why his father had said that Gu Fuzhou was an enigma. However, Lin Qingyu thought the term "weird" fit him better.

A couple of days earlier, the Imperial Academy of Medicine welcomed a distinguished guest: a famous physician from the South.

Southern physicians were skilled in creating gu. Most citizens in the Central Plains regarded the practice of making gu as sorcery and were

terrified even to mention it. It wasn't sorcery, however. Medicinal ingredients could be divided into helpful and harmful, and the same could be said for gu. Poisonous gu could harm, but helpful gu could treat a patient. Lin Qingyu's father knew both the benefits and the harm gu could bring, and he'd written to the famed physician from the South, who'd finally accepted the invitation to the Imperial Academy of Medicine to teach its students the art of harnessing gu. Lin Qingyu's father hoped that the students would learn to use gu to save patients, as well as how to neutralize it.

Though Lin Qingyu had read a lot of medical texts, his understanding of gu was limited to theory. Naturally, he wouldn't miss the Southern physician's class at the Imperial Academy of Medicine.

After the class, Lin Qingyu walked out of the room carrying medical books and suddenly heard a whistle. He looked in the direction the sound had come from and saw Gu Fuzhou standing by the railing, smiling and waving at him. The Tianji Guards still trailed behind the general.

Lin Qingyu hurried over. "General, have you come because your heavenly arachnid poisoning is flaring up?"

"No. I visited the palace to report to the crown prince and passed by the Imperial Academy of Medicine. I thought…" Gu Fuzhou smiled, embarrassed, and rubbed the corner of his eye. "Well, I came to pick you up after class."

Lin Qingyu was surprised. Pick him up after class? He wasn't a child who'd just started school and needed to be picked up. And how could the general have passed the Imperial Academy of Medicine while going from his residence to the crown prince's quarters?

Before Lin Qingyu could reply, his hands were suddenly empty. Gu Fuzhou had taken his medical books, the movement natural, as if he normally held books rather than his Qingyun Jiuzhou spear.

"No need to trouble yourself, Great General," said Lin Qingyu.

"It's all right. I'm stronger than you, so I should exert myself more than you." Gu Fuzhou casually flipped through one of the texts. "So what did you learn in class today?"

"General, you probably aren't interested in medicine."

Gu Fuzhou smiled. "No, but I'm interested in anything you say, Imperial Physician Lin."

"We studied gu from the South."

"Gu? That's nice. A great beauty like you should make use of that."

Lin Qingyu paused and stared at Gu Fuzhou probingly.

Gu Fuzhou didn't notice, though—or maybe he noticed but didn't acknowledge it. "Speaking of which, I've always wanted to burn incense for your late husband. As your godbrother, it's what I should do."

Lin Qingyu looked away. "You can go to the marquess of Nan'an's manor to burn incense for the young marquess, General."

"Forget about going to his manor," Gu Fuzhou said. "Why not your place?"

"My residence?"

"You would also have enshrined his tablet in your residence…" Gu Fuzhou paused. "Right?" He didn't sound confident as he pressed for an answer.

Lin Qingyu had enshrined such a tablet, but it didn't name Lu Wancheng.

When Gu Fuzhou noticed Lin Qingyu's ambivalent expression, it set him on edge as well. "You said you like his physique better, but you didn't even set up a tablet for him?" he teased. "Well, that makes sense. After all, it was a marriage enacted by the emperor. You didn't truly care much about my difu."[11]

"Difu" was yet another weird title he'd come up with.

Lin Qingyu's logic said that he didn't need to pay attention to the general's provocative words. Yet for some reason, when Gu Fuzhou spoke to him in such a tone, he couldn't help responding: "I do have a tablet for him."

"Really?" Gu Fuzhou smiled. "Then take me to it, and prove that to me."

Thinking of the name "Jiang Dazhuang" on the tablet, Lin Qingyu calmly replied, "That's not very convenient."

"Why not?" Gu Fuzhou asked, confused.

Chapter 51

LIN QINGYU HAD NEVER invited anyone to his newly established residence, not even his family. And, while Gu Fuzhou was the Lin family's benefactor, there was simply too much about him that aroused suspicion. Besides, the Tianji Guard monitored him at all times, which meant that Xiao Cheng would eventually learn about everything he said or did.

Thus, bringing Gu Fuzhou to his residence now wouldn't be a smart move.

"My late husband passed from sickness not even half a year ago," Lin Qingyu said after considering several responses. "If I take you to my residence, we'll be raked over the coals."

Gu Fuzhou thought he had a point, and thus he didn't insist. "Take me to the marquess of Nan'an's residence, then."

Lin Qingyu assumed that Gu Fuzhou had come to the palace on horseback, but in fact he—like Lin Qingyu—traveled around by carriage. Once they arrived, a servant notified the marquess, who was there to welcome them. Unlike when the crown prince had visited, however, the marquess didn't come outside his residence; instead, he greeted them in front of the main hall. A few months had passed since Lin Qingyu last saw the marquess, who did look much better than before, thanks to the child Lady Pan carried.

Both the marquess of Nan'an and Gu Fuzhou were first-rank officials, so they greeted each other as equals. Lin Qingyu watched quietly from the side as they exchanged pointless pleasantries. Gu Fuzhou appeared serious as

he spoke to the marquess, his speech brief and to the point. He conducted himself in the straightforward manner of a seasoned warrior, greatly resembling the austere war god he was rumored to be.

Yet mere moments ago, Gu Fuzhou had been teasing Lin Qingyu with a smile, telling him that breeding poisonous insects befitted a great beauty like him. And he'd made a show of chopping a brick into two with his bare hands a little while earlier.

Once again, Gu Fuzhou's ability to change his demeanor with ease reminded Lin Qingyu of a certain young man.

The missive from Western Xia, the secret code, Gu Fuzhou's bizarre words and actions, his overzealous friendly overtures—were all these coincidental? Was Lin Qingyu making something out of nothing? Perhaps… there was some other secret that he wasn't privy to.

The marquess didn't seem that gratified to hear that Gu Fuzhou was at the manor specially to pay his respects to Lu Wancheng. Instead, he gave the two guards behind Gu Fuzhou a worried look.

"Thank you for coming, General," the marquess said, then turned to his servant. "Escort the general to the ancestral hall. I have to head to the palace now, so I won't be keeping you company."

Gu Fuzhou inclined his head slightly. "Do as you please, Marquess."

The marquess pretended Lin Qingyu wasn't present throughout this conversation, obviously still fixated on the devastation his late son's male wife had brought upon the marquess's family. He didn't want to speak to Lin Qingyu or even give him a single glance.

In the ancestral hall, Gu Fuzhou looked down at Lu Wancheng's spirit tablet on the lowest shelf, his mouth twitching. He wanted to laugh, but he felt like he shouldn't, so he merely sighed softly and said nothing.

Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou took three sticks of incense each from a servant before standing shoulder to shoulder in front of Lu Wancheng's spirit tablet and bowing three times. Gu Fuzhou placed the incense into the brazier first, then leaned sideways so that Lin Qingyu could reach it.

As Lin Qingyu stepped forward, he told Gu Fuzhou in a low voice, "You're followed by guards no matter where you go, General, and they monitor everything you say and do. Doesn't it get annoying?"

"I can't do anything about it," Gu Fuzhou replied in resignation. "The crown prince is adamant that my hasty return to the capital implies nefarious intentions; he probably thinks that I'm cooking up some wicked scheme with my accomplice in the capital. Let them follow me around; at least that can dispel His Highness's doubts and prove my innocence."

"You worry too much, General," one guard said impassively. "You were poisoned under very suspicious circumstances, and the perpetrator has yet to be found. His Highness ordered us to follow you so that we can shield you from harm."

Lin Qingyu had thought that his and Gu Fuzhou's voices were low enough, but the guards standing behind them had heard every single word anyway. As Lin Qingyu heard it, all the Tianji Guard's members were skilled and powerful in their own right, and now it seemed that was indeed the case.

Gu Fuzhou let out a nonchalant chuckle. "Sure. Whatever the crown prince says."

Lin Qingyu felt as though Gu Fuzhou was insinuating something. “You wanted to clear your name, yet you openly sought me out at the academy. Don’t you fear that the crown prince will grow suspicious that I’m the accomplice you mentioned?”

A serious frown replaced Gu Fuzhou’s smile. “I don’t want to involve you in this, but aren’t you my godbrother? It should seem normal for us to share a close bond. And our innocence will be clear sooner or later—don’t worry.”

As the saying went, the innocence of the innocent was proven eventually—with the caveat that the person concerned must *actually* be innocent, or at least convinced of their own innocence, to prevent others from exploiting any words or actions of theirs that could be misinterpreted.

“Does this mean that you rushed back here just to neutralize the poison, with no other goal in mind?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“What nefarious motive could I have? I just want to stay alive and relax for a few more years. However bold I may be, I’d never dare deceive the emperor, lest he have my head.”

“The northwest is devastated by war, and our nation has been torn asunder, causing suffering to those who live on the borders,” Lin Qingyu said. “Yet you recovered from the brink of death with no goal but to enjoy your life. How are you deserving of the trust of the court and Great Yu’s people?”

“There’s something that only I know for sure—that my victories on the battlefield rested on sheer luck alone.” Gu Fuzhou laughed quietly. “Five victories in a row was doable. If I pressed my luck further, though, I’d eventually be met with continuous failure. No one—whether imperial court

officials or the commoners of Great Yu—should put their trust in me. I no longer wish to be responsible for millions upon millions of lives; it's exhausting.

"An incompetent general should shed his armor and take up farming in the fields as early as he can. Only then will he deserve the people's adoration and trust," Gu Fuzhou concluded.

Lin Qingyu disagreed that Gu Fuzhou was incompetent. The general merely wanted to slack off. He truly grew to resemble a certain young man more and more by the day.

Having paid their respects to Lu Wancheng, Gu Fuzhou and Lin Qingyu went their separate ways. As Gu Fuzhou entered his carriage, the driver asked, "Will you return to your residence, General?"

After he was met with a long silence, he made to ask again, but then Gu Fuzhou's voice came from inside the carriage: "No. There's someone else I want to meet."

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Even after spring became summer, the emperor's condition did not improve; rather, it gradually worsened. The imperial physicians were all helpless against the emperor's migraines, even Head Imperial Physician Lin, who had recently returned to his post.

"Over the past decades, only the superficial symptoms of His Majesty's chronic headaches have been treated; the treatments haven't gotten to the root of his ailment," Lin Rushan explained. "But common prescriptions no longer

work on His Majesty, and the lack of an effective treatment has worsened his condition."

The empress's heart flared with anxiety as she watched over the emperor at his bedside. "Are we really out of solutions?"

Lin Rushan hesitated. "About that…"

"Spit it out," Xiao Cheng ordered.

"A miracle physician from the South was invited to teach a class at the academy today. During that class, he describes how headaches can be cured by releasing gu—poisonous insects—into the patient's brain…"

"Absolutely not!" the empress said immediately. "Poisoning His Majesty with insects—such an impudent suggestion! Do you wish for death?"

All the imperial physicians present prostrated themselves in front of the empress, imploring her, "Calm down, please, Your Majesty!"

Xiao Cheng looked down at Lin Rushan on the floor. "Your son really does take after you, Head Imperial Physician Lin, in your fearlessness," he remarked contemptuously. "You were stationed with Gu Fuzhou for months, and took him as your godson during that time—have you now become one of those ignorant military morons who defer only to Great General Gu, not the emperor?"

Lin Rushan broke out in a cold sweat. "This humble official would never dare."

"Never bring that up again," the empress snapped. "You may leave."

"Stay there," Xiao Cheng ordered. "I haven't said all that I wanted to say yet, so why the rush, Mother?" The crown prince's lips turned up in a

mocking smile. “Pass along my command: From today onward, Lin Rushan —who uttered horrendous nonsense and proposed poisoning His Majesty with insects—is demoted to the position of standard sixth-rank medical secretary.”

Medical secretaries at the Department of Imperial Physicians were in charge of administrative tasks such as managing the department’s inventory of medical texts and herbs. They were neither granted real power nor allowed to treat any patients.

The empress objected to Xiao Cheng’s command. Lin Rushan was Great Yu’s most skillful physician, and forbidding him to treat any patients would be a waste of his prowess. Before she could say anything, however, Xiao Cheng raised a hand to stop her. “He’s merely an imperial physician. There’s no need to say more, Mother.”

Lin Rushan kowtowed to him. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

The empress shut her eyes, left with no choice but to swallow her disapproval. While the emperor was delirious from sickness, the crown prince was naturally free to abuse his power however he liked.

“Your Highness.” Xue Ying walked in. “The leader of the Tianji Guard has asked for an audience with you.”

“Have him wait in Qinzheng Hall,” Xiao Cheng replied.

Melancholy rose within the empress’s heart. Xue Ying, who’d served the emperor for decades, and the Tianji Guard, a shadow guard legion in the emperor’s employ, were now both at the crown prince’s beck and call… Xiao Cheng was truly only one step from the throne.

“This afternoon, Great General Gu left his residence for the first time since he returned to the capital,” the leader of the Tianji Guard reported to Xiao Cheng in Qinzheng Hall. “He went to the Imperial Academy of Medicine first, saying that he wanted to escort Imperial Physician Lin home after his class. They headed to the residence of the marquess of Nan’an to pay respects to Young Marquess Lu. The marquess exchanged only a few sentences with the general before leaving hurriedly. Finally, he visited the residence of the fourth prince.”

Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes. “Xiao Jie?”

Aside from Xiao Cheng, the undisputed victor, only two princes had survived the brutal competition for the throne. One was the empress’s idiot of a son, and the other was the fourth prince, Xiao Jie.

Xiao Jie wasn’t an idiot, but he might as well be—he was as dumb as rocks, with nothing to his advantage but his looks. Not only had his birth mother come from a lowly background, he wasn’t favored by the emperor either. He hadn’t even been seen as truly in the running for the throne.

“What did they talk about?” Xiao Cheng asked.

“They started off with the usual formalities. Then Great General Gu told the fourth prince many amusing stories from the battlefield. The prince enjoyed listening, so he invited the general to come back to his residence for roast mutton and wine.”

Was Xiao Jie the reason Gu Fuzhou had stopped at nothing just to return to the capital? No—he knew he was being surveilled, so they saw merely what he wanted them to. In that case, was Gu Fuzhou stirring the waters on purpose to hide his real intentions?

“Continue monitoring him,” Xiao Cheng commanded. “Report to me anytime should anything out of the ordinary occur.”

***

When news of Lin Rushan’s demotion reached Lin Qingyu’s workplace, he immediately took the day off and returned to his family’s residence. He thought that his father would be in low spirits, but Lin Rushan seemed unruffled, even telling his wife with a smile, “Now I can finally return home on time every day.”

“I didn’t expect you to be so cheerful even now, Father,” Lin Qingyu remarked.

“I was demoted to a sixth-rank position without many duties, which isn’t that significant,” Lin Rushan said, looking for a silver lining. “You know, before I returned to the capital, the great general reminded me to be wary of the crown prince. But in my hurry to treat the emperor, I was careless.”

That surprised Lin Qingyu somewhat. “The great general told you to be wary of the crown prince?”

“Yes. He said that, in his desperation to return to the capital, he’d been forced to act very suspiciously, which meant that the crown prince would have his guard up against anyone close to him. I didn’t expect to be demoted as a result, though,” Lin Rushan said regretfully. “You and I have seen for ourselves the medicinal benefits of gu from the South. How terribly tragic that we can use it to treat commoners, but not the emperor!”

Lin Qingyu wasn't in the mood to think about the medicinal benefits of gu. Recalling Gu Fuzhou's words repeatedly, he felt he'd vaguely touched upon something. Still, he couldn't reach a clear revelation, however hard he tried. It felt as if he were trying to see flowers shrouded in fog.

There were two possible reasons "Jiang" couldn't come to meet him. Either he was somewhere far away, or he was being forced to conceal his identity. But could there be another possibility?

"Well, this isn't a good time."

"I don't want to involve you in this."

Lin Qingyu pondered the matter for a long time before asking, "Father, you told me that Great General Gu intercepted a secret missive from Western Xia from which he extracted the secret code 'If odd, change; if even, remain the same.' But who else aside from him has read that missive?"

Lin Rushan had no idea why Lin Qingyu would ask that question. "The general wouldn't let anyone else read it, naturally."

"Not even Deputy General Zhao?"

"That, I have no idea about," Lin Rushan replied.

Something flashed in Lin Qingyu's eyes. Perhaps he'd gotten the wrong idea from the beginning. The missive might have originated, not in Western Xia, but in…Yongliang.

***

The next day, Lin Qingyu delivered Gu Fuzhou's antidote to his residence as usual. The moment he stepped out of the carriage, Yuan Yin

came forward to greet him. “The general isn’t in the residence today, Imperial Physician Lin.”

“Where is he, then?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“He went to visit the fourth prince in his quarters,” Yuan Yin answered with a smile. “You can just give me the antidote, and I’ll have it brought to him.”

Lin Qingyu considered that. “It’s fine. I’ll head there myself.”

All princes older than eighteen—aside from the crown prince—were required to establish a residence outside the imperial palace. After taking the throne, the crown prince would bestow titles upon those princes, after which they would be required to move to their respective territories. It so happened that the fourth prince turned eighteen this year.

In front of his destination, Lin Qingyu disembarked from his carriage, only to see several dozen horses by the entrance. Noticing that the majestic mounts resembled warhorses from the barracks, Lin Qingyu guessed that Gu Fuzhou wasn’t the only military official present today.

Lin Qingyu relayed the reason for his visit to a servant by the door, who went inside to pass the message along. A short while later, an effeminate yet handsome man walked out—a steward of the residence, judging from his attire.

“Greetings, Imperial Physician Lin,” the steward said. “Please come with me.”

Lin Qingyu followed the steward to the rear courtyard. From afar, he caught a whiff of wine and cooked meat. A whole sheep was roasting atop an open fire; around that stood dozens of men, most clad in armor, eating and

drinking without restraint. Only two of the men looked relatively modest. One was a young man wearing a brocade robe, his lips rosy and his comportment vivacious. He tore into the mutton with his bare hands, but he didn't look uncouth doing so. This young man was none other than the fourth prince, Xiao Jie.

The other was Gu Fuzhou. He sat amid the crowd, his sword-sharp brows stark on his sculpted features. The coldness surrounding him dissipated when he saw Lin Qingyu, and he smiled as he raised his cup in greeting.

"Your Highness, General—Imperial Physician Lin is here," the steward reported.

"I heard that a great beauty had recently joined the Department of Imperial Physicians. Would that be you?" Xiao Jie's youthful face was flushed. "You're as good-looking as they say!"

"He's much prettier than Princess Jingchun, and they used to call her the greatest beauty in the nation!" a military official proclaimed brashly.

"You've really had too much to drink, Lao-Wu. How can you compare him to a woman…?"

"Imperial Physician Lin is here to deliver my antidote," Gu Fuzhou said, beckoning to Lin Qingyu. "Come over here!"

"Have you had any wine to drink, General?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"No." Gu Fuzhou handed Lin Qingyu his filled cup as proof. "I'm drinking tea instead."

Lin Qingyu looked behind Gu Fuzhou. The men from the Tianji Guard were still there, but they appeared incensed, almost humiliated.

It didn't take Lin Qingyu long to figure out why.

“General Gu only returns to the capital once in a blue moon, yet they’re following him everywhere,” an official remarked. “You’re certainly good-tempered, General. If I were you, I would’ve lost it long ago. What is this, house arrest?”

“I asked to return very suddenly, so it makes sense for the crown prince to harbor suspicions,” Gu Fuzhou replied.

“Even so, suspicions should be based on evidence! Almost a month has passed, and His Highness hasn’t seen the slightest treachery on your part. What right does he have to keep sending his lackeys after you?”

“The crown prince tends to favor stuck-up civil officials while being wary of us military men,” another of the general’s colleagues proclaimed. “Who conquered the lands Great Yu stands on? And who guards the nation against adversaries? The answers have probably slipped His Highness’s mind!”

Gu Fuzhou’s expression hardened. “General Wu, speak with caution.”

“Not only am I brave enough to talk about this here, but I’ll also speak up during our audience with His Majesty tomorrow morning,” General Wu Zhan continued, undeterred. “Great General Gu has fought valiantly on the battlefield for sixteen years, garnering countless victories and accolades. He shouldn’t be subject to such humiliation! This is terribly wrong! I can’t bear it anymore!”

“Me neither!”

“Tomorrow morning, we’ll report this to the emperor! The crown prince shouldn’t treat the general like this!”

“That’s right! What’s the worst that could happen—him keeping tabs on a dozen of us at once?” another general exclaimed. “We’ll see whether anyone will keep putting their lives on the line for him after being subjected to that!”

“Hey, hey—calm down,” Xiao Jie said soothingly, appearing somewhat helpless amid the chaos.

“His Highness the fourth prince invited us here today so that we could have a meal together,” Gu Fuzhou said sternly. “If you insist on being disrespectful, we can end this here.”

“Fuck this bullshit!” General Wu Zhan roared, dashing his cup to the ground. “I refuse to comply! I, Wu Laosan, will enter the palace here and now!”

Gu Fuzhou shook his head and sighed. “You’re all out of my control.” He sat back and let the military officials express their frustrations, remaining silent throughout.

Sitting beside the general, Lin Qingyu watched him finish drinking the antidote. “When the crown prince balks under the pressure to clear your name, he’ll eventually recall the Tianji Guard, and you’ll finally get to say and do as you please, General.”

Chuckling softly, Gu Fuzhou feigned a sudden realization. “You’re right, I think. That hadn’t even occurred to me. You’re so clever, Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu’s heart fluttered in his chest. He gazed downward, smiling. “I can’t possibly compare to you, General.”

Chapter 52

IN RECENT YEARS, the emperor had tended to prefer civil officials, remaining wary of military officials, which made those hot-blooded warriors feel wronged. Most were straightforward and prone to speaking their minds; they bottled up their discontent only because Great General Gu, whom they greatly respected, warned them to put the nation and its people over their own honor or disgrace.

Now that the crown prince had gone a step further, monitoring and hampering their respected great general to an extreme extent, the military officials had all run out of patience. Drunk off the wine they'd consumed, those present began to discuss taking the matter to court the next morning.

Lin Qingyu's brow furrowed tightly as he listened. These military officials had seemingly applied the entirety of their intelligence and strategic skill to commanding the army and fighting wars; they obviously weren't well-versed in imperial affairs, and they were terrible at reading the room. Lin Qingyu feared that, if they reported this matter to the emperor without a plan, they would lose a verbal battle against the civil officials colluding with the crown prince.

Just then, Xiao Jie interrupted them with a truthful statement: "You've never won an argument against those civil officials, though."

That rendered the military officials speechless.

"You all end up scarlet in rage every time, trying so hard to come up with a retort yet unable to utter a single word," the fourth prince added.

Lin Qingyu looked at Gu Fuzhou, who remained silent. The general looked calm and unruffled, but despite that, Lin Qingyu had a feeling that Gu Fuzhou desperately wanted to speak and was barely holding his tongue.

Everyone discussed the matter for a while, and they ultimately decided to go with the flow and seize the chance if it arose. They were determined to save the great general from his extreme misery and to return to him the respect and glory he deserved.

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Early the next morning, General Wu Zhan dismounted from his horse in front of the palace, ready to attend the morning meeting, when he heard someone call, “General Wu.”

He looked back and saw the beautiful imperial physician he’d met the day before in the fourth prince’s residence. Now clad in the indigo-blue robes of a civil official, the imperial physician stood quietly to one side, single-handedly improving General Wu Zhan’s opinion of civil officials without saying a word.

General Wu Zhan grinned and greeted his acquaintance good-naturedly. “Looking for me, Imperial Physician Lin?”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Are you still going to report Great General Gu’s situation to the emperor as discussed yesterday, General?”

“Of course,” General Wu Zhan said immediately. “My brothers and I came to a mutual agreement.”

“In that case, General, please commit this to memory. No matter what the civil officials say, you merely need to respond like this: ‘What else?’ ‘So?’ ‘Really?’ ‘I don’t believe you.’ ‘What you’re saying is reasonable, but I refuse to listen.’ That will suffice,” Lin Qingyu said. “Never try to reason with them, and don’t pay any mind to what they say either.”

“‘What else?’ ‘So?’ ‘Really?’” As General Wu Zhan picked up on the ingenuity of these responses, a big grin broke out on his tanned face. “Genius! Absolutely genius! That will infuriate those old men!”

Lin Qingyu smiled placidly. “I learned that from my late husband. I hope it helps you, General.”

Great Yu’s most respected military official—aside from Gu Fuzhou—was Duke Wu, who was fast approaching his eighties. After saving the former emperor’s life on the battlefield, he had been awarded a hereditary first-rank dukedom and was permitted to bring his saber to court. Upon hearing about what Gu Fuzhou was being put through in the capital, Duke Wu had come out of his longtime retirement to attend court again, bringing with him the prized saber the previous emperor had bestowed upon him.

Under Duke Wu and General Wu Zhan’s leadership, the imperial court was rowdier than a market. The Tianji Guard had told the civil officials in advance that the military officials planned to make a scene in court and thus, the civil officials had prepared themselves. The moment General Wu Zhan brought the matter up, they started listing in detail how and why Gu Fuzhou’s actions were suspicious.

They explained that the war had reached a stalemate in the northwest when Gu Fuzhou, in a juvenile display of irresponsibility, had out of nowhere sent dozens of memorials requesting permission to return to his hometown

and retire. Would he leave his army of three hundred thousand soldiers behind in the northwest just like that?

There was also the secret code in the secret missive from Western Xia. Was it possible that the general had carelessly spread around highly confidential military information? The crown prince believed that General Gu was innocent, of course, but he needed to investigate—if only to appease everyone. His Highness had also ordered men from the Tianji Guard to follow the general in the capital to ensure his safety.

The military officials were less glib than the civil officials, but they were loud, and they merely offered simple responses regardless of what the civil officials said. A few of the crown prince's confidants gave speeches so long that their mouths got dry, only for General Wu Zhan to reply nonchalantly, "Really? I don't believe you."

When they asked him why not, he replied, "I can't say for sure, but what you said seemed odd."

The prideful old prime minister's breath caught in his throat when he heard those words, and he almost passed out in the main hall.

Xiao Cheng's fingertips rapped the arm of his wooden armchair positioned below the throne. His face was dark; he was evidently on the cusp of an outburst. After the swooning prime minister was carried away, the crown prince finally ground out, "That's enough."

Everyone stopped, their heads turning toward him.

Xiao Cheng took a deep breath. "Let me think about this."

These military officials were straightforward in their behavior but not foolish. They all knew that the crown prince had merely said this to keep

stalling, preferably until Gu Fuzhou left the capital.

Thus, they made an even bigger ruckus and refused to comply, even after the meeting was adjourned. One after another, they requested an audience with the crown prince. One or two military officials didn't amount to much. An alliance of a dozen colleagues, on the other hand, was a different matter entirely.

Xiao Cheng was in no position to reprimand them, so he could only avoid continuing to meet with them. Thus, the officials split themselves into two groups. Half wrote memorials addressed to the crown prince, while the other half used a trick often employed by civil officials—they kneeled in front of Qinzheng Hall and proclaimed they would stay there until the crown prince agreed to audiences with them.

***

In stark contrast to the chaos ensuing in the palace, Gu Fuzhou's residence was the picture of calm serenity.

The breeze carried the faint fragrance of lotus leaves, accompanied by the crisp sound of morning dew dripping from fresh bamboo leaves into the pond. Beside the pond sat two reclining chairs shielded from the sun by a canopy.

When Lin Qingyu had come to deliver medicine to Gu Fuzhou, the general was fishing while lying supine in a chair, looking as though he was having the time of his life. A bowl of iced red grapes freshly ladled up from a well had been placed within his reach.

“Imperial Physician Lin.” Gu Fuzhou removed the straw hat on the other chair. “After the journey here, you must be feeling the heat. Come, sit down and have some fruit.”

Taking a seat, Lin Qingyu looked at the crystal-clear water droplets on the grapes, then pinched one grape between his fingers. “My short-lived husband liked iced food during summer as well.”

Gu Fuzhou paused in the middle of chewing.

Lin Qingyu pretended he didn’t notice. “Unfortunately, he was sickly and unable to stomach such cold food. Last year, he ate a few chilled grapes he was craving, and he fell so sick that he almost lost his life.”

Gu Fuzhou let out a low chuckle. “Uh…that’s rough.”

“If he could ever live a life in which he had a strong, healthy body, he’d probably eat a few more grapes during summer to satisfy that craving.”

“I presume he would,” Gu Fuzhou said. “They say the more sorely you lack something, the more intensely you crave it. Perhaps, right after reincarnating, he’d wolf down all those foods he wasn’t able to eat before until he was stuffed.”

Lin Qingyu finally realized why Gu Fuzhou had insisted that he watch as the general lifted those stone dumbbells.

Idiot.

Lin Qingyu looked on as Gu Fuzhou popped grape after grape into his mouth. “It’s easy to gain weight if you eat fruit at night,” he remarked. “You’ll have to double your training today, Great General Gu.”

Gu Fuzhou wilted. “I *am* training. Fishing is a sport too.”

“Are you moving?”

Gu Fuzhou rotated his wrist. “Yes.”

“People in their thirties gain weight the moment their control lapses slightly, unlike younger people,” Lin Qingyu warned. “You’re fit and muscular right now, General, but imagine if all that muscle on you got flabby. Aren’t you afraid that it’d keep you from getting married?”

Gu Fuzhou stayed silent for a long time. Aggrieved, he covered his face with his palm. “Stop right there, Imperial Physician Lin. I’ll go lift some weights later.”

As they spoke, the fishing rod started to shake. Gu Fuzhou’s eyes lit up, and he reeled his fish in with practiced efficiency.

“I didn’t understand why my father loved fishing so much, but now, I suddenly understand it. This is much more fun than playing cuju or dakyu, isn’t it?” he marveled. “You don’t get tired, either.”

“You were orphaned as a small child, General. Where did this ‘father’ come from?” asked Lin Qingyu.

Gu Fuzhou smiled mysteriously. “What do you think?”

“No idea,” Lin Qingyu replied blandly.

“This father I mentioned is of course my *god*father—your father.”

Lin Qingyu nodded obligingly. “My father does like fishing.” He looked at the tiny loach Gu Fuzhou had spent half a day fishing for, then rose from his chair. “When you’re done with everything here, General, you can pay your respects to my late husband at my residence.”

Gu Fuzhou’s eyes lit up again, more brightly than when that loach had taken the bait. “I will.”

Xiao Cheng had yet to respond to the military officials' protests, although they'd gone on for two days. It was evident that the crown prince would be a domineering dictator who never took no for an answer. At this point, this conflict wasn't merely about whether the guards around Gu Fuzhou should be recalled; rather, the incident concerned every military official in Great Yu. If Xiao Cheng was capable of such tyranny as crown prince, then military officials would surely be in even direr straits after he ascended to the throne.

When Lin Qingyu walked past Qinzheng Hall, he saw a bustling throng of people in front of the entrance, on the verge of barging in. However stubbornly Xiao Cheng refused to budge, he'd soon be forced to.

Directly after his shift, Lin Qingyu headed to the Imperial Academy of Medicine. Ever since his father was demoted and Gu Fuzhou fell under investigation, many of Lin Qingyu's colleagues at the academy gave him disdainful looks and didn't bother to hide them. Previously, they'd only discussed his private life behind closed doors, but now they did it loudly in his face. They lacked the guts to do anything else, fortunately, so Lin Qingyu usually pretended they didn't exist.

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Under the tutelage of the miracle physician from the South, Lin Qingyu had begun to practice breeding rudimentary gu. One night, he stayed in Qiancao Apothecary to work on that.

Past midnight, he heard someone pull open a drawer of the herb cabinet. Having a vague notion of who the intruder was, he walked in the

direction of the noise. It was the person he'd expected.

"Guard Shen," he greeted the man.

Shen Huaishi tucked his arms behind his body, his gaze darting around the room. "Imperial Physician Lin."

"Did you get injured again?" Lin Qingyu asked, giving the shadow guard a once-over.

"No," Shen Huaishi said, looking shifty.

"If not, why are you here?"

Members of the Tianji Guard often got themselves injured. On top of that, Shen Huaishi had to carry out most of his missions in secret, which made it inconvenient for him to request the services of an imperial physician. When wounded, he came to Qiancao Apothecary for medicine to treat his external injuries.

Still, Lin Qingyu didn't know of any other shadow guard who was permitted to enter and exit the academy as he pleased. He'd heard that the crown prince himself had granted Shen Huaishi this special privilege.

When no words came out, Lin Qingyu held his palm flat. "Give it to me."

Shen Huaishi didn't reply.

The shadow guard should have had nothing to fear; Lin Qingyu was merely an imperial physician unversed in martial arts who couldn't have withstood even a single strike from him. Yet, when subjected to Lin Qingyu's stony glare, Shen Huaishi ended up handing over what he held—a small tin of ointment.

Sniffing it just once, Lin Qingyu knew instantly what the ointment was for.

Lin Qingyu stalked over to yank Shen Huaishi's collar open. Seeing red marks all over the other man's collarbones, he demanded coldly, "Is he always so rough with you in bed?"

Shen Huaishi took two steps back, covering his neck as a blush crept across his cheeks. "Imperial Physician Lin, you…!"

"Come over here." Lin Qingyu returned to his desk and withdrew a silver needle from his medicine chest. "Give me your hand."

Shen Huaishi followed him, despite his confusion. Lin Qingyu pierced the skin on his fingertip, and fresh blood flowed into a special dish. Lin Qingyu observed it for a while before saying in surprise, "There's no trace of gu in your body, unexpectedly."

"Why would you think there would be?" Shen Huaishi asked.

"The crown prince treats you so badly, yet you're deeply infatuated with and unshakably loyal to him. Beyond the presence of gu that can induce infatuation, I can't think of any explanation for that."

Shen Huaishi smiled bitterly. "Imperial Physician Lin, why do you always…look down on me?"

Lin Qingyu gazed at him. "It's not that I look down on you—it's you who looks down upon yourself."

Chapter 53

LIN QINGYU DIDN'T SEE Shen Huaishi as a friend, but he knew quite well what the man had been through. The shadow guard had known Xiao Cheng since they were children and had begun learning martial arts to protect him. He'd positioned himself as the prince's loyal servant. Xiao Cheng had saved his life once, which had been all the more reason for Shen Huaishi—who thought it necessary to repay every act of kindness—to obey the crown prince's every command.

Objectively, Shen Huaishi was a passable servant. However, what Lin Qingyu wanted was not Xiao Cheng's loyal lackey, but someone he could use to kill the crown prince.

He'd tried repeatedly to sway Shen Huaishi to his side, only to achieve inadequate results. It was evident now that if Lin Qingyu wanted to make use of Shen Huaishi, his words alone would be far from enough—he would have to do something more drastic.

Faced with Shen Huaishi's silence, Lin Qingyu didn't bother saying any more on the subject. "Show me your injuries," he ordered instead.

The ointment Shen Huaishi had grabbed was usually for consorts who had experienced the emperor's favor for the first time. Shen Huaishi was clearly suffering from injuries in an area most people would hesitate to mention.

Shen Huaishi looked up abruptly. The flush that had receded crept up his neck again as he fell into dumbfounded silence.

“I’m a physician—I’ve seen everything there is to see,” Lin Qingyu told him impassively.

Shen Huaishi shot up from his seat, his words coming out in a barrage. “They’re nothing serious. And I have something to attend to now, so—”

“For someone as physically strong as you to come here for medicine, you must be suffering from significant injuries. You needn’t feel shy—I don’t like men.” Lin Qingyu paused, feeling vaguely as if what he’d just said wasn’t quite right.

Shen Huaishi was on the verge of prostrating himself just so that Lin Qingyu would stop talking. “Thank you, Imperial Physician Lin, but I’ll go now.”

The moment he did turn to leave, a voice came from outside the door. “Who’s in there in the middle of the night?”

Lin Qingyu recognized the voice—it belonged to Hong Changfeng, a sixth-rank imperial physician. A feud had developed between them after Hong Changfeng gave Lin Qingyu erroneous information that delayed the delivery of Gu Fuzhou’s antidote.

Now that Lin Rushan had been demoted, Hong Changfeng no longer bothered to conceal his jealousy and hatred of Lin Qingyu. He deliberately used terms like “male wife” in front of Lin Qingyu, assigned him night shifts frequently, and gave him unpopular tasks like treating the late emperor’s worst-tempered elderly consort or tackling patients with off-putting symptoms.

Lin Qingyu didn’t have strong feelings about all that. Probably because he’d become close with Hu Ji, he’d grown to see all patients as equal. A life saved was a life saved, even if it was a servant’s. But if Hong Changfeng

insisted on causing Lin Qingyu trouble outside that, Lin Qingyu would definitely give the other man a piece of his mind.

Unsurprisingly, Hong Changfeng frowned the moment he saw Lin Qingyu. “It’s already past curfew. What are you doing, sneaking around in the apothecary?”

“His Majesty granted me permission to enter and leave the premises as I please,” Lin Qingyu replied coldly. “Do you know what that means?”

Hong Changfeng had no response ready, but he didn’t want to lose face just like that, so he turned on Shen Huaishi accusingly. “Who are you, and what are you holding?”

Shen Huaishi pressed his lips together. Noticing his reluctance to divulge his identity, Lin Qingyu said, “He’s a good friend of mine.”

Shen Huaishi looked at Lin Qingyu’s profile, stunned. The constant meekness and obedience in his gaze lightened as something else flickered in his eyes.

Hong Changfeng thought that he could hold this against Lin Qingyu. “His Majesty granted permission to you, not your friend, and yet you’ve brought him here this late at night and let him steal,” he lambasted the junior physician. “Are you so arrogant that rules and regulations mean nothing to you?”

Shen Huaishi opened his mouth, wanting to explain, but Lin Qingyu stopped him. “This was an oversight on my part. I’ll apologize to Head Imperial Physician Chu tomorrow. Shen-xiong, put that medicine back for now.”

Hong Changfeng smirked. “You’d better go apologize in person, or I’ll take the appropriate measures as your colleague. Don’t blame me for that when the time comes.”

Having said that, he turned and left.

“I got you in trouble,” Shen Huaishi said guiltily.

“That may not be the case.” Lin Qingyu gave him a small smile. “On the contrary, you may have done me a great favor.”

“I may have done you a favor?” Shen Huaishi repeated doubtfully.

“That depends on how deeply the crown prince cares about you.”

“His Highness doesn’t care about me, I’m sure,” Shen Huaishi murmured.

Lin Qingyu didn’t comment on that. “We’ll see.”

From the moment Lin Qingyu stepped through the door the next day, Hong Changfeng’s gaze was on him constantly. He even took care to oh-so-kindly remind Lin Qingyu about the matter during their midday meal. “When will you apologize to Head Imperial Physician Chu, Imperial Physician Lin?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t even deign to look at him. “Now.”

Chu Zhengde didn’t work in the same space as the other imperial physicians. He had his own room—which, not long ago, had been Lin Rushan’s.

Lin Qingyu announced his arrival with a knock on the door, then entered the room when asked to, greeting the man inside. “Head Imperial Physician Chu.”

Chu Zhengde was in the middle of writing a prescription for the emperor. He hadn’t managed to devise anything innovative and effective

despite shedding all his white hair in the process of attempting to do so. Naturally, upon seeing Lin Qingyu, he had nothing good to say. “Ah—what a rare guest I have here. You don’t usually think so highly of me, Imperial Physician Lin; you must be here about something important.”

Lin Qingyu got straight to the point. “I know of one way to treat His Majesty’s condition.”

“You?” Chu Zhengde glowered. “As if you could have any good ideas.” Before Lin Qingyu could answer, he added, “Or do you have the same thing in mind as your father—treating His Majesty with poisonous insects?”

“You should know how effective those insects from the South can be, Head Imperial Physician Chu,” Lin Qingyu said.

Chu Zhengde’s sardonic expression was replaced with something more serious. “The South is far away from the Central Plains, and people here cower at even a passing mention of those poisonous insects. During the late emperor’s reign, his consorts and concubines used such insects to harm his children. His Majesty is the most revered person in Great Yu—the empress and crown prince would never allow such filth to fester in His Majesty’s body.”

“What you call ‘filth’ can be ground into powder and made into medicine. That’s not as effective as live insects, but it could still alleviate His Majesty’s headaches.”

Chu Zhengde sneered. “That’s easy for a naive young man like you to say. You want His Majesty to ingest a powder made completely from dead insects without added herbs or ingredients that could enhance its medicinal effects. How would that be different from an attempt at regicide?”

“A miracle physician from the South and I found the herbs best suited for this purpose.” Lin Qingyu pulled a sheet of paper from inside his sleeve—the fruit of their labor over the past few days. “This is the prescription, complete with the exact quantities of the ingredients required and how they should be added.”

Chu Zhengde stared at Lin Qingyu in disbelief for a while, then snatched the prescription and took it in hungrily.

“You can read through the prescription yourself and conduct a trial before making a decision,” Lin Qingyu said indifferently. “I’ll take my leave now.”

While Lin Qingyu spoke to Chu Zhengde in private, Hu Ji visited the Eastern Palace. Xiao Cheng hadn’t been able to get any shuteye for the past two days, troubled by the military officials’ demands for an audience with him. Noble Consort Chen had noticed that he didn’t look well when he came to greet her that morning, so she’d told Hu Ji to look the crown prince over at the Eastern Palace.

Hu Ji took Xiao Cheng’s pulse. “You’re fine, Your Highness, just tired from a lack of sleep. I’ll give you a dose of calming medicine, and you should sleep better after taking it.”

Xiao Cheng waved for Hu Ji to leave, his eyes shut. He did not expect the physician to add, “I have something to report to you, Your Highness.”

“Oh?” Xiao Cheng opened his eyes. “What do you—a mere imperial physician—have to report?” he drawled.

“Guard Shen went to the Imperial Academy of Medicine for ointment last night, only to be driven out by Imperial Physician Hong Changfeng. Guard Shen was quite seriously injured when he arrived, so much that it

affected his gait. Only when I asked him did I learn that he works for you, Your Highness," Hu Ji said, withdrawing a full case of ointment from his medicine chest. "I worried that Guard Shen couldn't treat his wounds when he needed to, so I brought the ointment with me today."

Hearing that his shadow guard had been bullied worsened Xiao Cheng's bad mood. "I didn't know about this," he said coldly, his gaze darkening with rage.

"Imperial Physician Hong didn't know who Guard Shen was. He mistook him for a thief, which caused this misunderstanding," Hu Ji answered deferentially.

Xiao Cheng had indeed unleashed his lust on Shen Huaishi the previous night, but he hadn't thought that Shen Huaishi would neglect to apply medicine to the spots that had become tender. "He's as good as mute," he snapped.

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When Lin Qingyu emerged from Chu Zhengde's office, Hong Changfeng craned his neck, eager for some drama—but none greeted him. What came instead was an announcement from the crown prince: "Hong Changfeng neglected his duties and disrespected the crown prince. Hence, he is now removed from his position as imperial physician and barred from working in the palace."

Hong Changfeng's eyes widened in shock, and he collapsed to the ground in dismay. Before he even registered what had happened, two eunuchs

had dragged him out of the room.

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The military officials persisted in their demands for three days straight. The civil officials, already at their limit, advised the crown prince cease investigating Great General Gu for the sake of the royal court's stability. It would be unwise to continue a lengthy investigation that had made a mess of the imperial court while yielding no results. But the young crown prince, aggressive and stubborn to a fault, refused to be forced into submission, stopping at nothing to maintain his dominance.

Thus, the standstill continued.

Lin Qingyu brought this up to Gu Fuzhou, who said gravely, "How can they make things so difficult for the crown prince? I've heard that he was so enraged that he fell sick, and imperial physicians needed to be summoned. If something happens to His Highness, how am I supposed to face our people? I'll have no choice but to atone for my sins by taking my own life."

Outside, in front of the door, the two men from the Tianji Guard silently traded a look.

The first few times Lin Qingyu delivered the antidote to Gu Fuzhou's residence, the general was standing, but after that he opted to sit instead. Today, however, he was…lying down.

"Rise and drink the antidote, General," Lin Qingyu said.

"Carry it here, please, Imperial Physician Lin," Gu Fuzhou drawled, having finished with his grave speech.

Lin Qingyu took the antidote to Gu Fuzhou, sitting down beside his bed. Gu Fuzhou, still half prone, propped his chin on his hand and drank the antidote before handing Lin Qingyu the empty bowl.

As Gu Fuzhou lay back down peacefully, Lin Qingyu couldn't help but ask, "How long have you slept today, General?"

"I've been in bed since lunch."

"Then where did you eat your dinner?"

Gu Fuzhou blinked. "In bed."

Lin Qingyu found himself unable to withstand the over-the-top blinking of a hulking thirty-year-old who usually wore a stony expression. "You can't keep doing this, General. It would be fine if you were a sickly patient, but you're strong and healthy now. How can you possibly lie in bed day after day doing nothing? Do you want to be a useless wretch so badly?"

"I'll be honest with you, Imperial Physician Lin," Gu Fuzhou said. "After nearly dying, I had a realization."

"What would that be?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"If one achieves his dream of becoming a layabout, he can be said not to have a care in the world. Isn't that so?"

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say.

"You don't know what my life used to be like," Gu Fuzhou lamented. "I rose earlier than the chickens and went to bed later than the dogs. My subordinates put me through hell during the day, and I'd finally turn in for the night only for enemies to attack. I wasn't allowed to sleep in for even a minute—I had to get up and run for my life! Can you imagine that degree of

suffering? I wasn't allowed to sleep in for even a *minute*!" the general repeated emphatically.

Lin Qingyu couldn't help but chuckle. "You deserved that."

Watching the physician laugh, Gu Fuzhou felt his control slip. Despite knowing that he was still under threat, he uttered the name he'd spent every waking moment thinking about. "Qingyu…"

Heat suffused Lin Qingyu's chest. He likewise realized that this wasn't the best time to answer, but he still couldn't help himself. "Hm?"

"You've gotten so thin." Not wanting to dampen the mood, Gu Fuzhou added with a grin, "Meanwhile, I've gained so much muscle. Aren't you mad?"

Lin Qingyu was speechless. He was indeed mad—so mad that he wanted to poison this "Jiang" into impotence once again.

Chapter 54

"THE POISON IN YOUR BODY has almost been neutralized, General," Lin Qingyu said when he took Gu Fuzhou's pulse. "You shouldn't suffer any lingering side effects."

Gu Fuzhou hadn't expected anything less. "Your father monitors my condition consistently back in Yongliang," he said nonchalantly. "Of course I'll be fine."

Something twinged in Lin Qingyu's heart. There was a question he'd always wanted to ask Gu Fuzhou, but… He cast a glance toward the door.

"It's late now, so I'll take my leave," he said instead, taking care to remind Gu Fuzhou, "Remember to lift your weights, General."

Scrutinized by the Tianji Guard's two pairs of eyes, Gu Fuzhou could only let Lin Qingyu go, although he couldn't bear it. "Fine," he said listlessly. "I'll do that once I've slept in for one more hour."

As Lin Qingyu rose from his seat, he heard sounds coming from outside; another member of the Tianji Guard had arrived. Gu Fuzhou sat up in bed. "It isn't time for them to change shifts yet," he remarked, his voice tinged with excitement.

If the guard wasn't here to start his shift, then…

The newcomer said something to the other two guards, and all three entered the room to prostrate themselves in front of Gu Fuzhou. "His Highness has increased the number of imperial guards patrolling the capital,"

one said. “From today on, they will be responsible for safeguarding the general’s residence, and we’ll return to the Tianji Guard.”

Lin Qingyu heaved a long sigh of relief, feeling as if the sky above had cleared.

Meanwhile, a grin slowly bloomed on Gu Fuzhou’s face. “You’ve worked hard these past couple of days,” he told the guards. “Be on your way, then; I won’t see you off.”

The Tianji Guards left. Before Lin Qingyu could get a word in, an arm pulled him into an embrace, forcing him to sit back down on the side of the bed.

When Gu Fuzhou had arrived here, the bed was nothing but a hard slab of wood. Unwilling to withstand such misery, he’d immediately had Yuan Yin swap in a massive bed with fluffy quilts and silk sheets that were cool to the touch during the hot summer.

Lin Qingyu felt only the softness of those sheets, though, not their coolness. Gu Fuzhou burned as warm as a brazier, and his embrace heated Lin Qingyu’s body.

“Qingyu, I’m back,” the general said in his deep voice. “Sorry I’m late—it’s all because of my incompetence.”

Lin Qingyu shut his eyes and lightly patted Gu Fuzhou’s back. “I know you’ve been working hard on it.”

“But what’s the point of all that if I couldn’t come back on time regardless?” Gu Fuzhou, still hung up on that, couldn’t help but swear aloud: “Fuck. As I’d expect of a main character, Xiao Cheng is way too smart for his

own damn good—but whatever, let's not talk about him now. Let me hug you."

His arms tightened around Lin Qingyu again, almost cutting off the young physician's breath. Lin Qingyu was about to tell Gu Fuzhou to let go when he heard Gu Fuzhou marvel, "It's beating so fast…"

“No, it isn’t,” Lin Qingyu retorted without thinking.

“I mean *my* heart. But I won’t pass out this time—no matter how fast it beats,” Gu Fuzhou said, sounding perfectly content.

Memories surged within Lin Qingyu, making him laugh out loud. “*I’m* going to pass out if you don’t let go of me.”

Only then did Gu Fuzhou do so. He sat cross-legged on the sheets as Lin Qingyu settled on the side of the bed. Bathed in flickering candlelight, they stared at each other in silence until Gu Fuzhou shifted his gaze down. Even if his cheeks had flushed, Lin Qingyu wouldn’t have noticed, thanks to the general’s suntanned skin.

Lin Qingyu carefully studied Gu Fuzhou’s face. Its strong shape and defined features made him look completely different from the handsome young nobleman Lu Wancheng had been. Nonetheless, both men’s eyes were the same—the general’s were still dazzlingly brilliant, shining as bright as stars.

At the end of the general’s brow, a hairsbreadth from his eye, Lin Qingyu saw a faint scar. It looked new; Gu Fuzhou had probably gotten it a little over two months ago.

Lin Qingyu brushed his fingertips lightly over the scar. “How did you end up transmigrating into Great General Gu?”

“No idea,” Gu Fuzhou sighed. “But the moment I opened my eyes, I was spooked once again.”

The first time he’d awoken after his death, he’d been greeted by the sight of a classic beauty wearing marriage robes. The second time, however, he’d opened his eyes to see a tent brimming with burly men. That sharp

contrast, and the heavenly arachnid poison flowing in his veins, had almost sent him down to the underworld again. He would've died if he hadn't seen the blurry outline of his father-in-law, which told him that he was still in Great Yu, in a world that contained Lin Qingyu.

He'd barely managed to stay alive for the next two days, tethered to existence by his powerful desire to survive. During that short period of time, his father-in-law had concocted an antidote, pulling the general back into the land of the living.

"Military generals sent on an expedition can't return to the capital unless permitted by an imperial edict," Gu Fuzhou explained. "They aren't even allowed to write letters to their family. I knew that I couldn't return quickly, so I asked your father to be my godfather and mentioned it in my report to the emperor. I figured Xiao Cheng wouldn't do anything out of line to you if you were my godbrother."

Lin Qingyu thought about everything that had happened in the past couple of months. "Being Great General Gu's godbrother did save me a lot of trouble." Only when Xiao Cheng was sober, though. The crown prince had tried to force himself on Lin Qingyu after getting drunk on Princess Jingchun's birthday. If not for Shen Huaishi, Lin Qingyu wasn't sure he would have lived to meet Gu Fuzhou.

"I submitted memorial after memorial asking permission to return to the capital, but the emperor and crown prince—bastards, the both of them—stubbornly refused to grant me that." Rage flared within Gu Fuzhou. He'd been so anxious then that he'd suffered insomnia for the first time in his eighteen years of life. He'd lost a lot of hair too. "As the hundredth day after

my death fast approached, I could only try to let you know that I was still alive."

"So that so-called secret missive from Western Xia never existed," Lin Qingyu said. "You made it up completely."

"Yup," Gu Fuzhou said. "But then I returned to the capital, only to notice that none of the commoners had heard the saying, 'If odd, change; if even, remain the same.' That told me that Xiao Cheng hadn't done as I said. When I asked you about the phrase in front of the Tianji Guard, you told me, very calmly, that you hadn't heard it—so I guessed that you'd known for ages."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "On the hundredth day after your passing, I heard the secret code from a young eunuch in Qinzheng Hall."

"It took a hundred days to reach you?" Gu Fuzhou's heart ached. "You must've felt such grief back then."

Lin Qingyu paused. "Not really."

Gu Fuzhou looked at him. "Did you cry?"

When Lin Qingyu shook his head, Gu Fuzhou breathed a sigh of relief, grinning. "How coldhearted you are, Imperial Physician Lin—you refused to shed even a single tear for me."

"You're back now, aren't you?" Lin Qingyu murmured.

"Yes, I'm back again," Gu Fuzhou marveled. "Now, I want to live a leisurely life with you by my side until the day I die."

When the general mentioned "a leisurely life," Lin Qingyu didn't know whether he should be touched or tongue-tied. "Why were you so eager to return even after passing the secret code on to the capital? You should have

known how suspicious your actions were, and that Xiao Cheng—paranoid as he is—wouldn't let them slide."

"I knew, but I had no other choice," Gu Fuzhou said. "Firstly, I couldn't be certain that you'd hear the secret code. Secondly…" He hesitated. "I recalled that Princess Jingchun's birthday was in the summer."

Lin Qingyu's expression shifted. "I was supposed to die on Jingchun's birthday, right?"

"How did you…?" Gu Fuzhou's eyes widened. "Did Xiao Cheng do anything to you?"

"Yes." Even Lin Qingyu himself didn't notice the hint of petulance that now tinged his voice. "He grabbed my arm."

"Fucking hell. Which one?"

Lin Qingyu extended his left arm.

Gu Fuzhou cradled it to his chest, massaging it. "Did he touch you anywhere else?"

"No," Lin Qingyu sneered. "He switched to Shen Huaishi halfway through."

Gu Fuzhou fell silent for a while, then summed up all he wanted to say in a curse: "What a dickhead."

"How was I supposed to die?" Lin Qingyu asked. "By Xiao Cheng's hand, or Shen Huaishi's sword?"

"You tried to sacrifice yourself so that Xiao Cheng would die too, but Shen Huaishi appeared halfway through and shielded Xiao Cheng from what would have been a fatal strike. When your assassination attempt failed, you ingested poison you'd prepared in advance without blinking…" Gu Fuzhou

couldn’t continue to describe what had happened, despite the fact that it was merely a plot point in the original story.

“That does seem like something I’d do,” Lin Qingyu said impassively.

“I should’ve committed to coming back earlier,” Gu Fuzhou lamented.

“When you say ‘committed,’ are you talking about having my father dose you with poison?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Gu Fuzhou came clean, although petulantly. “I didn’t want to do that, but I couldn’t have gotten permission to come back here otherwise.”

Lin Qingyu swallowed. “Such foolish behavior.”

“Your father measured the dose skillfully. I’d be fine as long as I returned to the capital on time,” Gu Fuzhou said with a smile. “Don’t worry—everything is happening as I planned.”

Among other things, he’d foreseen the intervention of the Tianji Guard. He was being watched long before his return to the capital, since the memorials he’d persistently submitted to the royal court had aroused the suspicion of the emperor and Xiao Cheng. Shadow guards from the Tianji Guard had infiltrated his troops in Yongliang and tailed him back to the capital.

He’d considered revealing himself to Lin Qingyu immediately upon his arrival; even under the Tianji Guard’s careful watch, that was doable. But Xiao Cheng had ordered a thorough investigation into the people the general was close to, which had ended up implicating his father-in-law. Not wanting to involve Lin Qingyu, Gu Fuzhou had had no choice but to temporarily suppress his desire to let Lin Qingyu know that he was back.

Unfortunately, longing wasn't an easily concealed emotion, and Lin Qingyu was incredibly shrewd. He'd recognized Gu Fuzhou's situation, so even after realizing who the general was, he hadn't done anything rash. They'd put on an act while both being in the know. Only now were they finally free of the charade.

Lin Qingyu fell silent for a while. "Did you do all that—even going as far as poisoning yourself—just to come back and see me?"

"Of course," Gu Fuzhou replied without thinking.

Lin Qingyu shut his eyes and turned away, no longer meeting the general's gaze.

"Qingyu?"

Lin Qingyu remained silent.

When he saw Lin Qingyu's red-rimmed eyes, Gu Fuzhou didn't know what to do for a moment, but he mustered a grin anyway. "It wasn't just that, though. I told you how tough things were in Yongliang, didn't I?

"Even though I was suffering and constantly exhausted, I couldn't slack off without feeling guilty, seeing as I was responsible for the lives of three hundred thousand soldiers. I felt like a year was docked from my lifespan for every day I toiled there. I tried with all my might to come back here not just for your sake, but also for mine," he concluded, playing with the silky strands of Lin Qingyu's hair.

The pinch of sentimentality Lin Qingyu felt—already rare for him—dissipated instantly. "I expected no less from you."

"Yes. All of this was my fault, so don't be upset," Gu Fuzhou said. "Don't cry."

“I didn’t cry even when you died,” Lin Qingyu declared placidly. “Why would I cry when you’re still alive?”

After being forced to lead an army for several months, Gu Fuzhou—once totally unversed in military battle strategy—had grown to understand the importance of advancing when the enemy retreated and vice versa. If Lin Qingyu wanted to feign indifference, the general would pierce his facade. “I see a beautiful man with red eyes, but I won’t tell you who he is.”

Lin Qingyu was rendered speechless. *He really hasn’t changed at all.*

At that moment, Yuan Yin dashed inside. “Great General, someone’s here from the palace,” he announced. “His Majesty summoned you.”

Gu Fuzhou was stunned. “His *Majesty*? Not His Highness?”

“Yes, General. His Majesty summoned you.”

Gu Fuzhou turned to look at Lin Qingyu. “Isn’t he seriously ill?”

Lin Qingyu rose and calmly straightened his official robes. “I saved him.”

Chapter 55

INFIRMITY HAD PLAGUED the emperor for so long that the Ministry of Rites had already been preparing for his funeral. But a few days after Chu Zhengde started brewing him medicine following a new prescription, his condition improved, and he regained consciousness.

Although the emperor had ruled the nation for more than two decades, no notable deeds or tremendous achievements had occurred under his name —nor had any heinous misdeeds. He'd merely presided over the legacy his ancestors left behind, doing nothing remarkable.

The emperor was prone to doubt but attentive to national affairs at the same time. That was borne out by the fact that he summoned the crown prince the moment he awoke from his coma to learn what had happened in court while he was sick.

Nothing particularly noteworthy had occurred, save for that prickly debacle revolving around Gu Fuzhou. Subjected to immense pressure from the cohort of military officials, Xiao Cheng had recalled the Tianji Guard members he'd sent to monitor Gu Fuzhou.

The military officials refused to let the crown prince off the hook, though. The moment they knew that the emperor had regained consciousness, they sent a flurry of memorials requesting an audience with His Majesty. It was as if they'd been wronged to such an extent that reporting it to the emperor was an absolute necessity.

Lying in bed, the emperor tossed a memorial from Duke Wu to the ground near where Xiao Cheng stood. "Look what you've done!"

“I don’t think I did anything wrong, Father,” Xiao Cheng insisted, his gaze fixed at a spot in front of him. “There is much to suspect about Gu Fuzhou, and until we uncover the truth, we can’t let him do as he pleases in the capital. Are you truly unconcerned about what he’s up to, Father?”

“You still refuse to admit your wrongdoings!” the emperor raged.

Xiao Cheng prostrated himself in front of the emperor. “Please tell me clearly what I did wrong, Father.”

The emperor shook his head. “You’re still too young.”

The emperor was about as paranoid as Xiao Cheng, but having reigned over the country for so long, he’d become well-versed in the checks and balances of power; everything he did was for the sake of the bigger picture. Gu Fuzhou was acting suspiciously, true, but it wasn’t yet time to feud with him. For one thing, the capital’s military officials and the army of three hundred thousand in Yongliang would follow Gu Fuzhou’s every order, regardless of whether the general currently dwelled in the capital. Besides, Great Yu held no other war god capable of winning every battle he fought.

All other conflicts paled in comparison to Great Yu’s decade-long war against Western Xia; it had practically drained the national reserves and had caused countless casualties. Gu Fuzhou was indeed acting suspiciously, and was arrogant to a fault, but so long as he triumphed over their foes, he couldn’t be touched. They could wait until the northwest stabilized to settle the score with him and list his offenses; he’d surely be proven guilty on one count or another.

The emperor had long seen through Xiao Cheng. He knew the crown prince’s methods were aggressive and forceful, and that he was prideful, stubbornly refusing to admit defeat. He was certain that Xiao Cheng would

never be a benevolent ruler who heeded his officials' advice. If he ruled with an iron fist as monarch and ended up alienating his generals, then his army—however mighty and powerful—would be utterly useless.

After that brief but heated exchange, the emperor already felt weary; given his sickness, he was physically and mentally exhausted. "Cheng-er," he said.

Xiao Cheng's eyes widened. He couldn't remember the last time the emperor had called him that.

"Learn how to read people—figure out what their hearts most desire," the emperor said. "And also what *yours* most desires."

The heart is the most useless thing in this world. Xiao Cheng ducked his head, hiding his sardonic sneer. "Thank you for the advice, Father."

At that moment, Xue Ying came in and reported, "Your Majesty, Great General Gu is here."

The emperor forced himself to stay awake. "Have him come in. Cheng-er, stay; properly allay Gu Fuzhou's concerns alongside me."

"Yes, Father," Xiao Cheng said, holding his displeasure at bay.

Soon, a eunuch led Gu Fuzhou into the hall. The towering general looked majestic in armor, his dark-red cape billowing after him as he brought a chilly gust of wind with him into the palace.

Gu Fuzhou readied himself to kneel to the emperor, but the emperor stopped him with a chuckle. "No need for that, beloved official. Xue Ying, prepare a seat for General Gu."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Gu Fuzhou said.

The emperor was beaming. Looking at his face, Gu Fuzhou could guess why he'd summoned him in the middle of the night, denying the general and Lin Qingyu the chance to chat by candlelight.

The emperor first asked Gu Fuzhou how he was doing and seemed particularly gratified to hear that the lingering poison in the general's body had been neutralized. Then he brought up how the crown prince had sent members of the Tianji Guard to protect the general, failing to anticipate the discontent brewing among the military officials as a result.

"This is the crown prince's first time governing the nation in my stead, so it's natural that he made certain blunders," the emperor said. "Now that the matter is resolved, we'll leave pacifying the military officials to you."

At first glance, it might have seemed that the emperor was expressing concern for a beloved official, but he was actually siding with his son. He was certainly eloquent, as you'd expect of an emperor who'd ruled the nation for decades. Gu Fuzhou inclined his head stoically. "I understand, Your Majesty."

The emperor let out a few muffled coughs, then accepted the cup of tea Xiao Cheng presented to him. "You've reached the age of thirty, haven't you?" he asked the general.

"I'm thirty-one this year." Gu Fuzhou had a sinking feeling; a question about his age was usually followed by one about why he wasn't married yet.

"Ah—you're already thirty-one." The emperor chuckled. "At your age, I already had a few sons. My orders that you remain stationed at the northwest border must have kept you from marrying."

Even the sentences the emperor spoke as he brought the topic up were exactly as Gu Fuzhou had expected. "I have no intention of starting a family

before the war in the northwest ends," he replied.

"Now that's where you're going astray. You spend so much time stationed at the border throughout the year; you should have someone at home." The emperor considered it briefly. "My seventh daughter happens to be at a marriageable age. How about her?"

It took Xiao Cheng a moment to grasp the emperor's intentions. Betrothing a princess to Gu Fuzhou would placate the military officials, showing them that the emperor held them in high regard; moreover, Gu Fuzhou's future wife would be a more effective spy than Tianji Guards.

Xiao Cheng wore the ghost of a smile. "To be honest with you, Father, Seventh Younger Sister has always admired Great General Gu's dashing figure. I'm certain she wouldn't object to such a betrothal."

But Gu Fuzhou promptly refused. "This humble official appreciates the seventh princess's admiration, but I've already devoted my affection to another."

"Tell me, which noble family is this young lady from?" asked the emperor. "I'll grant you two a marriage."

He's doing this again, damn it. If he likes enabling marriages so much, he should step down from the throne and become a matchmaker. "Then I've devoted my affection to no one," Gu Fuzhou said.

"Do you think this is child's play, Gu Fuzhou?" Xiao Cheng snapped, his voice cold. "One moment you like someone, and the next moment, no one?!"

"Crown Prince," the emperor warned his son, then continued evenly, "If you aren't enamored of anyone else, I'll arrange for you and the seventh

princess to meet sometime. If it turns out that you aren't interested in each other, I'll have the empress select a noblewoman for you. Whomever you set your sights on, I'll grant a marriage to you both." Before Gu Fuzhou could refuse, the emperor coughed again, taking away the general's chance to speak up. "I'm tired now, so take your leave."

***

The emperor's health took a turn for the better—after recuperating for a few days, he could already sit upright—mostly thanks to Chu Zhengde. The emperor intended to reward the physician handsomely, only for Chu Zhengde to admit to the emperor that he hadn't written this new prescription; seventh-rank imperial physician Lin Qingyu had.

The emperor remembered that name. "Was he the male wife who wrote the prescription used to treat the epidemic?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Chu Zhengde replied.

Considering that it had been so challenging to find someone who could treat the emperor's illness, the emperor couldn't have cared less whether Lin Qingyu had once been married to a man. "Pass on our imperial edict: Lin Qingyu is promoted to deputy fifth-rank court physician."

The fifth-rank head imperial physician was the highest-ranking official in the Department of Imperial Physicians, followed by the deputy fifth-rank court physician and the other court physicians. His promotion meant that Lin Qingyu was now on equal footing with Chu Zhengde, and of the same rank as

the deputy censor-in-chief, the second-in-command of the Imperial Censorate.

When Lin Qingyu went to the emperor's bedchambers to express his gratitude, the emperor was accompanied by a male bedservant, no more than seventeen years old, with a feminine, slender figure. The bedservant sat on a footstool, leaning his head on the emperor's lap like a docile, cherished pet.

Seeing Lin Qingyu, the emperor asked uncertainly, "Have I…met you before?" There was no way he wouldn't have remembered such a beautiful face if he'd ever seen it.

"I was lucky enough to gaze upon Your Majesty's royal visage once, six months ago," Lin Qingyu answered.

The emperor gazed at him for a long time. "Attend to us alongside Chu Zhengde from now on," he commanded.

***

As a court physician serving the emperor in close quarters with Chu Zhengde, Lin Qingyu carried out duties that included routinely taking the emperor's pulse, performing acupuncture, and writing prescriptions. The young physician was now practically in the emperor's inner ministerial circle. However, whenever he thought of the way the emperor had looked at him, Lin Qingyu thought that he'd rather Chu Zhengde had taken credit for treating the emperor's sickness. But unfortunately, although he and Lin Qingyu didn't see eye to eye politically, Chu Zhengde was extremely

principled. He thought it beneath him to steal his younger colleague's thunder.

After the day's shift, Lin Qingyu walked out of the Department of Imperial Physicians only to see Gu Fuzhou leaning against a palace wall, his arms crossed. He appeared to be pondering something or other with a frown on his face.

"General," Lin Qingyu greeted him.

Gu Fuzhou smiled at him, standing up straight. "Imperial Physician Lin."

"Why are you here?"

"Her Majesty invited me to the palace to admire the flowers," Gu Fuzhou explained. "Since I was nearby, I came to walk you home."

Why would the empress have invited Gu Fuzhou to admire flowers out of nowhere? The last time she'd invited someone to do that, she'd been picking a concubine for Xiao Cheng.

They motioned for the eunuch leading them to leave, then made their way to a deserted area. There, Gu Fuzhou began hesitantly, "Qingyu…"

"Say it."

Gu Fuzhou took a deep breath. "Would you want to take me as your bride?" he asked in a low voice.

Lin Qingyu stopped in his tracks. "What?"

Gu Fuzhou pressed his palms together and brought them to his forehead. "Do a good deed and take me as your bride, please."

Lin Qingyu gave him a thoughtful look but then refused without hesitation. "No."

Gu Fuzhou had guessed that Lin Qingyu would say that, but he choked nonetheless. “Why not?” he asked, persistent.

“Why *should* I take you as my bride?” Lin Qingyu asked, confused.

Gu Fuzhou attempted to convince him that it was a good idea. “I took you as *my* bride once. Don’t you want to do that to me and regain your dignity as a man?”

“Not really.”

Gu Fuzhou looked agonized. “But if you don’t marry me, I’ll be granted a marriage again!”

Lin Qingyu brow furrowed. “Granted a marriage…again?”

The general explained that the emperor wanted to marry the seventh princess off to him. The flower-viewing party the empress had thrown today was meant to allow him to meet the princess.

Lin Qingyu’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Isn’t that rather nice? You don’t like men—which means you like women. The seventh princess is beautiful, gentle, and kind, not to mention royal. She’s more than a good match for you.”

“I don’t think so,” Gu Fuzhou said seriously. “I’m actually eighteen years old, and in my hometown, men can only get married once they’re twenty-two.”

“In that case, why did you suggest marrying me just now?”

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “Marrying and having children early with *you* wouldn’t be that big a deal—I’d do it in a heartbeat, even if I had to be punished for breaking the law.”

Hearing that, Lin Qingyu appeared discomfited. Gu Fuzhou took advantage of his momentary hesitance to redouble his efforts to convince his companion. “Think about it, Imperial Physician Lin. Won’t you feel proud when you get to take a war god as your bride?”

“I’m not taking you as my bride,” Lin Qingyu said coolly. “Great General Gu is dead, and no one knows where his soul rests. Not only did you —his body’s occupant—fail to live up to his glorious reputation as Great Yu’s war god, you’d also besmirch that reputation by making him the wife of a man.”

“I have no other choice.” At this point, Gu Fuzhou was so unhappy that he resorted to sophistry. “The emperor is having me marry because you saved his life, so you should take responsibility for my situation.”

Lin Qingyu sneered. “You’re shameless to say that. If I hadn’t saved the emperor, and I’d let Xiao Cheng ascend to the throne effortlessly, things would only have gotten worse for you.”

“Fine. You can go back to your duties—no need to mind me.” Gu Fuzhou sighed. “I won’t give you any more trouble. It’s all right. I’ll think of a way to deal with this myself. I’m *totally* fine.”

Lin Qingyu’s temple throbbed. “Can you not contort Great General Gu’s face with such a pathetic expression? When a man weds another man, he has to wear makeup, a veil, and a golden headdress. That’d be fine if you were still Lu Wancheng, but you’re Gu Fuzhou now. You want to stain your lips red and wear a huadian on your brow in General Gu’s body—?” His mouth twitched as he pictured the scene. “I’m afraid lifting the veil would give me nightmares.”

Gu Fuzhou was stunned. Rather than offering reasonable justifications such as “I don’t like men,” “A marriage between two men is against the mandate of the heavens,” or “A wife is a virtuous woman, and you’re too lazy,” Lin Qingyu had refused his proposal because…he thought Gu Fuzhou would look hideous wearing bridal robes and a huadian.

Gu Fuzhou turned Lin Qingyu’s words over in his mind again and again. “If you don’t want to take me as *your* bride,” he asked tentatively, “are you willing to be…*my* bride?”

“Perhaps there’s another way,” Lin Qingyu said pensively.

The moment Gu Fuzhou met Lin Qingyu’s gaze and picked up on the hint of excitement in his eyes, he knew that this great beauty was once again up to no good.

“Come to my quarters tonight,” Lin Qingyu said.

Chapter 56

WHEN LIN QINGYU RETURNED to his quarters, he informed Hualu and Huantong that they would have a guest that night—the first since he'd moved in. Huantong figured that they'd be hosting Hu Ji, while Hualu thought the visitor would be a relative of Lin Qingyu's.

"Neither of you are right," Lin Qingyu said. "It'll be my godbrother, Great General Gu."

Huantong was overjoyed, while Hualu's cheeks flushed with excitement. Everyone in Great Yu knew the war god Gu Fuzhou; he was a figure greatly respected by young men and women like them. Before Lin Qingyu could say anything else, they eagerly began preparing food and drink for the guest.

"Is the item I told you to order ready?" Lin Qingyu asked Huantong.

"Yes, Young Master," Huantong replied. "I set it down in your study."

Incense could still be burned for the late Lu Wancheng in the Lu residence's ancestral hall, but the heroic Great General Gu had died for his country without anyone knowing; thus, he couldn't enjoy offerings made to him by the living. According to Gu Fuzhou, who'd been given a chance in another life after saving a pregnant woman, the original Great General Gu—who had saved countless lives—was sure to have transmigrated into another world as well.

Nonetheless, Lin Qingyu had Huantong order a blank tablet, which he enshrined in a secret room behind the study.

Even after dinnertime, Gu Fuzhou was nowhere to be seen. Huantong stood in front of the residence's entrance, craning his neck in anticipation of their guest, only for Yuan Yin to arrive with a message. Duke Wu had suddenly visited the general's residence with two bottles of fine wine, wanting to drink and chat with Gu Fuzhou. The duke was Gu Fuzhou's senior, and he'd played a key role in pressuring Xiao Cheng to recall the Tianji Guard. Thus, unable to refuse Duke Wu, Gu Fuzhou had had no choice but to delay his visit.

"The general said that you shouldn't wait up for him in case he ends up running too late," Yuan Yin added.

Lin Qingyu thanked him, then went to eat his evening meal before heading to his study. Gu Fuzhou had told him not to wait up, but how could he possibly fall asleep when he knew the general was coming?

When someone's whistling broke the silence of the night, Lin Qingyu knew that a certain person had arrived. Huantong should have come to announce Gu Fuzhou's arrival, though. What on earth was Gu Fuzhou up to now?

Walking out of the study, Lin Qingyu saw a dark figure vault over the wall with practiced ease, landing perfectly on his feet. Then Gu Fuzhou clapped his hands, saying, "Good evening, Qingyu."

"Why come in like that?" Lin Qingyu asked expressionlessly. "I left the entrance open for you."

"I'm visiting a widow in the dead of night. Coming in through the main entrance would be so boring. If we're going to do something exciting, we should start off with a bang."

“Who said we’re doing something exciting?”

Gu Fuzhou asked a question he knew the answer to. “If we’re not, why did you invite me into your quarters in the middle of the night, Imperial Physician Lin?”

Thinking of the pitiful life Gu Fuzhou had previously lived as Lu Wancheng, Lin Qingyu did his best to rein in his temper. “Because this isn’t something we can discuss at the palace,” he replied, summoning his patience. “Come here.”

Lin Qingyu’s house was much smaller than either the marquess of Nan’an’s or the general’s residence. “Didn’t I ensure that you’d come into a sizable inheritance?” Gu Fuzhou asked as he surveyed his surroundings. “You could’ve bought a house the size of the marquess’s manor.”

“And risk getting reported by the Imperial Censorate for a display of extravagance unbefitting of my rank?” Lin Qingyu retorted as they walked to his study. “There aren’t many people in my residence anyway. What would be the point of buying a big house?”

Lin Qingyu’s study consisted of two rooms. The outer chamber was full of rows of bookcases and had a desk in front of the window, which was where Lin Qingyu worked. If he got tired in the middle of reading or writing something, he could rest a bit in the inner chamber.

The moment Gu Fuzhou entered that inner chamber, he spotted the bunk bed he’d designed for himself and Lin Qingyu. After a moment of stunned silence, he laughed out loud. “Why did you bring this with you?”

“This residence happened to have too few beds,” Lin Qingyu said.

It was such a terrible lie, he didn’t bank on Gu Fuzhou believing it.

Gu Fuzhou's present body was much longer than the bunk bed. He stroked the silk blankets on the top bunk, where Lin Qingyu had slept while Lu Wancheng spent night after night tortured by sickness. Gu Fuzhou turned to look at Lin Qingyu, a grin blossoming on his face.

The general's pitch-black eyes shone brightly, twin pools holding Lin Qingyu's reflection. Under his gaze, Lin Qingyu felt strangely unsettled. The faint fragrance of herbs, intertwined with the scent of ink and paper, permeated the study as Lin Qingyu cast his gaze down. "Weren't you just having a drink with Duke Wu?" he murmured. "Why don't I smell alcohol on you?"

Gu Fuzhou's lips turned up in a smile. "I took a bath before coming to see you. Now you know how highly I regard you, don't you?"

"Bathing before visiting is your way of showing that?"

"Yes." Gu Fuzhou sounded dead serious. "It's a sign of my utmost respect for you."

Gu Fuzhou wanted to show Lin Qingyu his best side; he worried constantly that he didn't look cool enough to the young physician. It was strange that his confidence faltered in front of the man he liked; he'd always seen himself as quite attractive.

A small smile graced Lin Qingyu's face. "It's the first time I've heard someone say that."

Gu Fuzhou's breath hitched. He'd thought he'd be fine after drinking the wine Duke Wu had offered him, but now the alcohol rushed straight to his head. Sitting on the bottom bunk, he leaned back slightly, supporting himself with his arms. "Qingyu," he drawled, "I feel a bit drunk."

“Shall I make you a bowl of hangover soup?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Gu Fuzhou shook his head. “That won’t help. Let’s get down to business for now. Even Duke Wu has heard that the emperor plans to betroth the seventh princess to me. He congratulated me again and again as we drank—he said he plans to take my future son in as his disciple. What can you do to change His Majesty’s mind?”

Lin Qingyu collected himself. “The seventh princess is the emperor’s youngest daughter, and His Majesty has always doted on her. A heroic general with countless achievements to his name is naturally a good match for her. But if you were afflicted with an unmentionable disease, the emperor couldn’t bear to betroth her to you, for fear that she’d live her remaining years without being intimate with her husband.”

Unmentionable disease? Without being intimate with her husband? The moment Gu Fuzhou realized what that meant, he shot up from the lower bunk in disbelief. “Do you want me to die of rage, Lin Qingyu?”

“No,” Lin Qingyu replied, his tone calm.

“Cut it out. I think you *do* want me to die of rage, so that you can marry a woman,” Gu Fuzhou said sarcastically.

“Why would I need to kill you before I married?” Lin Qingyu asked, perplexed. “Couldn’t I marry someone else while you were alive?”

A shocked silence later, Gu Fuzhou let out an exasperated laugh. “Nice words, my friend. Utterly logical and reasonable too—I don’t have a retort ready.”

Lin Qingyu softened his tone. “You’re not worried about my medical prowess, are you? I’ll just render you temporarily impotent—I’ll make sure

you can get erect again when everything's blown over. Didn't you agree to that readily as Lu Wancheng?"

"I was forced to. How could I have cared about that stuff while my life was at risk? Things are different now, though," Gu Fuzhou proclaimed. "I must live with dignity."

"It'd be temporary," Lin Qingyu emphasized.

"Even so, it's out of the question," Gu Fuzhou scoffed. "You said earlier that Great General Gu shouldn't become a male wife because he'd risk his reputation. But now you're proposing that you render him impotent. Don't you feel something eating away at your conscience?"

Lin Qingyu considered that for a while. "You have a point."

If word of Gu Fuzhou's impotence spread, the general could no longer live with his head held high. His reputation in the army might suffer too. "Then we're left with no choice but—"

"For you to be my bride?" Gu Fuzhou couldn't help but interject, despite being in the middle of his tantrum.

"No choice but for me to murder both the emperor and Xiao Cheng at the same time," Lin Qingyu continued, as casually as if he were talking about making two chickens into soup. "If the emperor doesn't die, your betrothal and marriage are inevitable. And if the emperor dies and Xiao Cheng ascends to the throne, our situation will worsen." Lin Qingyu's gaze darkened, and he lowered his voice. "We have no way out…unless they both die and another prince takes the throne."

Gu Fuzhou fell silent, but not out of shock. Lin Qingyu was already bold enough to attempt to assassinate the crown prince; taking the life of the

emperor himself wasn't that different.

"You're getting more and more ambitious," Gu Fuzhou said with a smile. "Are you thinking of making the emperor your puppet so that you can rule from behind the scenes?"

Lin Qingyu raised a brow. "Why not?"

He wasn't that interested in ruling the nation. The only thing he'd wanted was to study medicine in peace, but the emperor and Xiao Cheng insisted on making things difficult for him and Gu Fuzhou, and he was sick of it. Lin Qingyu might as well go a step further—choose a prince who suited his needs and would never give them trouble, and help that prince take the throne.

Gu Fuzhou mulled it over. "After the battle for the throne three years ago, most of the princes are either dead or unfit to rule. Aside from Xiao Cheng, Xiao Jie and Xiao Li are the only two princes alive. Xiao Li is an idiot; despite being the emperor's legitimate son, he'll never inherit the throne. Xiao Jie is the only one left, isn't he? A dolt with a pretty face."

Lin Qingyu caught one important point. "You think he's pretty?"

Gu Fuzhou's survival instinct abruptly surged, driving him to correct himself: "Just average once you've seen him a few more times—unlike you, whose beauty stunned me the first time I saw it. And you keep getting more beautiful by the day. It's incredibly unfair."

Lin Qingyu scoffed at his teasing. "If Xiao Jie is a dolt, he'd be more easily manipulated."

Gu Fuzhou disagreed. "We likely wouldn't succeed while he has someone so shrewd in his employ."

“Who?”

“You’ve probably met him. He’s a eunuch who has attended Xiao Jie since their childhood,” Gu Fuzhou explained. “When Xiao Jie left the palace to establish his residence, he brought him along. Now he serves as the prince’s steward.”

“And he’s incredibly brilliant?” Lin Qingyu did remember him.

“Among the three smartest people in Great Yu,” Gu Fuzhou confirmed. “His physical inadequacy has also made him prone to extreme behaviors and treachery. We’ll have to be vigilant while dealing with him.”

Lin Qingyu’s brow relaxed. “We can discuss all this later. Our priority right now is to figure out how to take those two men’s lives.”

Murdering the emperor, who was already seriously ill, wouldn’t be a difficult task. Lin Qingyu could simply alter his prescription slightly, and it would look as though the emperor had died of his worsening illness. Xiao Cheng, though, would prove their most troublesome obstacle.

Gu Fuzhou thought likewise. “Xiao Cheng doesn’t take medicine, and he only eats food made in the Eastern Palace. After what happened with Lu Niantao, he’s even stopped using incense. If you can’t poison him, that leaves us with only one opening, which is—”

“—Shen Huaishi,” Lin Qingyu finished.

Gu Fuzhou nodded. “But, Qingyu, this can’t wait too long. The emperor seems to want me to get engaged immediately.”

“Well, if we succeed, your potential betrothal will be a thing of the past. And if we fail, we can always discuss remarriage.”

“In other words, whether Xiao Cheng dies will determine whether we marry again,” Gu Fuzhou concluded.

Lin Qingyu nodded. “That’s right.”

“I suddenly feel very mixed emotions,” Gu Fuzhou said, looking conflicted. “I wanted him to die right away.”

“But now you don’t?” Lin Qingyu asked, his voice cool.

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “No—I still do, naturally.”

Chapter 57

LIN QINGYU WAS determined to assassinate Xiao Cheng in this lifetime. Back when Gu Fuzhou was Lu Wancheng, they'd attempted that once, only to be met with failure.

Things were different now, though. Back then, they couldn't even enter the palace, whereas now Gu Fuzhou was the leader of Great Yu's military officials, and Lin Qingyu was a court physician attending the emperor himself. They'd gotten to know Shen Huaishi too, and the shadow guard would play a key role in their plan.

Lin Qingyu figured that their odds of success and failure were equal. If they succeeded, Lin Qingyu would try to keep the emperor alive until the moment Xiao Cheng died. By then, Gu Fuzhou would have involved Xiao Jie in their ploy. The emperor, distraught over Xiao Cheng's passing, would no longer direct his energies toward Gu Fuzhou's marriage. And if he still cared, Lin Qingyu would send him on his way before he could issue an imperial edict about such a marriage, which would leave Xiao Jie the only royal eligible for the throne.

If their plan failed, and both the crown prince and the emperor survived, Gu Fuzhou's betrothal would be inevitable. Since the general was so reluctant to wed anyone else, Lin Qingyu thought that helping him avoid it…wouldn't be so bad. Lin Qingyu wouldn't be discharged from his post—not while the emperor was still sick, unless His Majesty decided he'd had enough of this life. Even if Lin Qingyu married Gu Fuzhou again, he could continue to study and research at the Imperial Academy of Medicine. At any

rate, this wouldn't be the pair's first time getting married. They could always decide who the bride would be later.

By the time they'd finished hashing out their plan, nearly three hours had passed. Gu Fuzhou sat cross-legged on the bottom bunk, yawning. "It's already so late, Qingyu—I'm sure the doors of my residence are closed. Can I stay over tonight?"

Lin Qingyu scoffed. "As if they won't open the doors for you when you get back."

Gu Fuzhou laughed. "If I want to stay, I have to give you a reason, don't I?"

"If you want to stay over, you can—but you're sleeping on the top bunk," Lin Qingyu replied. He'd slept in that bunk every night back when Lu Wancheng's health was deteriorating, and climbing up and down had been a hassle.

Gu Fuzhou shot up where he sat and straightened the bedsheets. "Here you go, sir," he said, then effortlessly vaulted up to the top bunk.

Once they'd gotten into the bunk bed, one above the other, it was like going back to one of the nights they'd spent in the marquess's residence. They'd passed some of those nights chatting before going to sleep. Lu Wancheng had told Lin Qingyu stories from his hometown and sometimes taught him phrases in its dialect, or they'd put their heads together and made wicked plans. On other nights, when Lu Wancheng was jerked into wakefulness by the poison flowing through his veins, Lin Qingyu climbed down from the top bunk and gently cradled Lu Wancheng in his arms.

After Lu Wancheng's death, Lin Qingyu had slept alone on the bottom bunk for a long time. He'd always slept fitfully, his heart hollow in his chest.

Now that someone was finally sleeping above him, it felt as if his heart had filled to the brim.

They had just finished planning the assassination of their nation's monarch—an affair of great consequence—yet Lin Qingyu remained strangely calm. Even if they'd be walking a path without a clear end, surrounded by ravenous wolves and risking their lives with the slightest misstep, he had nothing to fear as long as Gu Fuzhou was by his side.

The bed creaked loudly as Gu Fuzhou rolled over to look down at the bottom bunk. "Qingyu, are you asleep?"

Lin Qingyu kept his eyes shut. "I am."

"Cool." Gu Fuzhou chuckled. "I just thought of something. Did you and Shen Huaishi see the symbol I left you?"

In the original plot of the novel, Lin Qingyu was made an imperial physician after Lu Wancheng's death as a reward for concocting a cure for the epidemic. He later ran into Shen Huaishi once in the Imperial Academy of Medicine. But without having Gu Fuzhou's reminder, the original Lin Qingyu hadn't paid much attention to Shen Huaishi, which ultimately led to the young imperial physician taking his own life in the Eastern Palace.

"I saw it." It was thanks to that symbol that Lin Qingyu and Shen Huaishi had gradually gotten to know each other. "I heard that only members of the Tianyu Sect would recognize it."

"Shen Huaishi only cares about two things: Xiao Cheng and the Tianyu Sect," Gu Fuzhou said. "The Tianyu Sect's destruction is his greatest weakness, and the reason Xiao Cheng had to win Shen Huaishi's heart back."

Gu Fuzhou had had a purpose in carving the cryptic symbol belonging to the Tianyu Sect on the wooden medicine chest he gave Lin Qingyu. When Shen Huaishi saw the symbol, he would assume that Lin Qingyu was affiliated with the Tianyu Sect and thus keep him from dying in the Eastern Palace.

"Did Xiao Cheng single-handedly cause the Tianyu Sect's destruction?" Lin Qingyu mused.

Leaning back, his hands behind his head, Gu Fuzhou answered with uncharacteristic seriousness. "The Tianji Guard and the Tianyu Sect were both packs of the emperor's henchmen, but one was a widely known organization, while the other worked behind the scenes. Under the surface, animosity brewed between the groups. The Tianji Guard had long worked against the Tianyu Sect, to the indignance of its leader—Shen Huaishi's father.

"The leader of the Tianyu Sect banked everything on Xiao Cheng, who was close friends with Shen Huaishi. He favored Xiao Cheng in secret and helped him accomplish a number of things. All of this was so that Xiao Cheng could take the throne and make the Tianyu Sect the most powerful such group in the nation. Back then, Xiao Cheng hadn't yet become crown prince."

The overly close relationship between a sect of shadow guards and a prince was absolutely forbidden. Shen Huaishi's father, the sect leader, thought that he'd been secretive about the matter, but the Tianji Guard managed to collect proof of his actions, which they submitted to the emperor. The battle for crown prince had almost ended at that point, with Xiao Cheng a hairsbreadth from the position.

The emperor had acknowledged Xiao Cheng's capabilities and knew for certain that he was the wisest choice for crown prince, but by covertly assisting the crown prince in the battle for the throne, the Tianyu Sect had challenged the emperor's authority. Thus, Xiao Cheng's father showed him an imperial edict announcing that the title of crown prince was being bestowed upon him. "I will authorize this imperial edict with my jade seal once the Tianyu Sect is destroyed," the emperor told him.

"Does that mean Xiao Cheng was behind the Tianyu Sect's demise?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"Well, to be fair, it was the emperor behind it. Xiao Cheng got cold feet at the last second because of his longtime friendship with Shen Huaishi. Unfortunately, that happened too late. The Tianji Guard didn't lose any time following the emperor's orders, and they did what Xiao Cheng couldn't bear to do. Xiao Cheng was almost kicked out of the running for crown prince over his hesitation as well. When the North King set his sights on Princess Jingchun, Xiao Cheng had to let the love of his life go in order to retain the emperor's favor. He regretted having shown mercy and blamed everything on Shen Huaishi." Gu Fuzhou scoffed. "Xiao Cheng lost the love of his life, while Shen Huaishi merely lost everyone in his family—how insignificant in comparison, right?"

"How do you know all this?" Lin Qingyu couldn't help but ask. "From historical materials in your hometown?"

"Nothing like that," Gu Fuzhou answered casually. "Everything—from your fate to Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi's tangled love-hate relationship—is written in a novel called *Huai's Revenge on the Monarch*. I had the good

luck to read that story—a fantastical romance unrivaled in my era—to the end."

"*Huai's Revenge on the Monarch*?" Lin Qingyu repeated, sneering. "No wonder Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi were the main characters."

"Yeah. The events of the book revolve around them."

After hearing Gu Fuzhou's lengthy explanation, Lin Qingyu had a question. "If you don't like men, why would you read a book like that?"

"Now that you've brought this up, forget about sleep." Gu Fuzhou sat up, looking incredulous—as if he'd been deceived. "My cousin recommended the book to me. She told me that it was the story of a shadow guard who got stronger and rose to greatness against the odds. The title sounded pretty cool, so I read the first page—and the rest is history."

Lin Qingyu was perplexed. "But didn't something seem wrong when you started to read it? How come you finished it anyway?"

"Something seemed off, true—but Shen Huaishi had it so rough that I wanted to swear a blue streak as I read. I really wanted to get to the day when he became powerful. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't bring myself to," Gu Fuzhou complained. "Do you know what that feels like? I was lobbing curses every time I flipped a page, but I couldn't stop reading for a moment. I got to the end before I knew it."

Lin Qingyu didn't understand the feeling Gu Fuzhou described. If he had happened across such a novella, he wouldn't have read past the first page. "How did things end for them in the novel?"

"Shen Huaishi turned heel after learning the truth. I explained what that phrase means before, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"He vowed to avenge his family, but on the verge of success, he hesitated. He didn't land the final blow, instead escaping the Eastern Palace to roam the land in solitude. Only after he left did Xiao Cheng finally realize that he cared about his shadow guard, and he stopped at nothing to force Shen Huaishi to come back to him—even dismissing his harem and placing the recaptured Shen Huaishi under house arrest.

"One day, Shen Huaishi finally had the chance to take his revenge, only for Xiao Cheng—who had become emperor—to bare his chest to the shadow guard, uttering the classic quote, 'Kiss me, and I'll give you both the nation and my life.' And then…Shen Huaishi was touched, you hear me? *Touched!* He forgave Xiao Cheng and became Great Yu's first male empress, and they lived happily ever after."

Gu Fuzhou still remembered how he felt when he'd finished the book. It was hard to put into words.

After listening to that entire story, Lin Qingyu quickly put the information he had together and reached a conclusion. If he wanted to finish off Xiao Cheng before the emperor could issue an imperial edict on Gu Fuzhou's marriage, he needed to do two things. First, he had to expose the truth behind the destruction of the Tianyu Sect to Shen Huaishi as soon as possible. Second, he had to ensure that Shen Huaishi wouldn't show Xiao Cheng last-minute mercy.

Chapter 58

A BUTCHER IN SUI CITY who now went by the name Zhu Yongxin would be key to exposing Shen Huaishi to the truth as soon as possible. According to Gu Fuzhou, Zhu Yongxin had been a mole for the Tianyu Sect during his stint as a member of the Tianji Guard; he'd concealed his identity so well that it was never revealed, even when his sect was destroyed.

Zhu Yongxin and Shen Huaishi were that devastating massacre's only two survivors. Zhu Yongxin had thought about telling Shen Huaishi the truth, only to be utterly crushed when Shen Huaishi joined the Tianji Guard. After that, Zhu Yongxin dared not remain in the Tianji Guard, so he feigned his death during a mission and escaped to Sui City in Xu Prefecture. There, he lived in hiding as an ordinary butcher.

In *Huai's Revenge on the Monarch*, Zhu Yongxin had told Shen Huaishi the truth in its entirety the day before Xiao Cheng took the throne. Lin Qingyu wanted to move that conversation up—the earlier, the better.

After getting his hands on the jade plaque that belonged to the Tianyu Sect, Shen Huaishi had wanted to head to Sui City in search of its owner as soon as possible. He had to delay his trip again and again, though, as Xiao Cheng forbade him to leave the capital.

They could have had Zhang Shiquan escort Zhu Yongxin to the capital if not for Zhu Yongxin's cautiousness; he was wary of entering the capital without good reason. And Zhu Yongxin was well-versed in martial arts, so what could Zhang Shiquan—a mere steward—possibly do to him?

“Leave this to me,” Gu Fuzhou said. “I’ll have him escorted to the capital.”

“How are you planning to do that?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“I have my ways,” Gu Fuzhou said with a chuckle. “You don’t become a great general out of nowhere.”

“Didn’t you, though?”

“I *did* become a great general out of nowhere,” Gu Fuzhou realized abruptly.

Xu Prefecture was far from the capital; it would take at least a fortnight to get there and back. Throughout those two weeks, the emperor and empress summoned Gu Fuzhou repeatedly to the palace for various reasons, forcing him to meet multiple eligible women. Aside from the seventh princess, there was also the prime minister’s granddaughter, the daughter of the minister of national defense, the niece of the crown prince’s attendant—all relatives of civil officials.

Once the lingering poison in his body had been neutralized, Gu Fuzhou should have gone back to leading his army in Yongliang. Before he set out for the capital, he had led a massive victory against Western Xia, forcing the enemy to lick its wounds and prepare for future warfare.

After Gu Fuzhou departed, Deputy General Zhao Mingwei was tasked with guarding the borders. He didn’t win every single battle he fought, unlike Gu Fuzhou, but he was certainly an equally capable general. With Zhao Mingwei present, Western Xia surely wouldn’t be able to cause any trouble for the moment—hence the emperor’s insistence that Gu Fuzhou stay in the capital until his matrimonial affairs were settled.

Now that Gu Fuzhou was in good health, he was required to attend court meetings alongside other military officials, plunging him into an abyss of suffering once again after a tragically brief vacation.

As Lin Qingyu bustled around his workplace, he was forced to devote some attention to Gu Fuzhou's numerous rants and complaints. He weaved through bookshelves in the library, putting medical texts he'd finished reading back in place as Gu Fuzhou persistently trailed right behind him.

"I really can't do this anymore, Qingyu," he whined.

Lin Qingyu didn't even deign to look at him. "What is it this time?"

"This morning, just as the roosters started to crow, Yuan Yin woke me up for morning court. Then I was stuck in Qinzheng Hall, forced to listen to hours of useless drivel until it was finally lunchtime.

"After that, they wouldn't let me take a nap at home—I was supposed to accompany the empress to an opera performance with the great-granddaughter of Elder Sun from Hanlin Academy. Even donkeys in a mill don't have to work all day like this." Gu Fuzhou covered his face in agony. "Middle-aged men are already prone to hair loss. I'm going to go bald if this continues."

Despite knowing that it would be futile, Lin Qingyu offered some perfunctory advice: "'When the heavens are about to confer great responsibility on a man, he is first put through mental suffering, physical exhaustion, and starvation.'[12] In comparison to that, this is nothing."

Unable to reach the highest shelf, Lin Qingyu was about to bring a ladder over, but Gu Fuzhou took the text he held—*Fundamentals of Surgery*

—and reshelved it for him. “I know you’re right, but I still don’t want to listen to that.”

Once he’d put back all the books, Lin Qingyu sat down and spread an old diagnostic record open on his desk. “You could feign sickness.”

“Wouldn’t I be guilty of deceiving the emperor?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be your first time committing that crime.”

Gu Fuzhou sat down beside Lin Qingyu. “Qingyu, I didn’t tell you all that because I wanted to hear you reason with me and offer solutions,” he said slowly.

“What do you want, then?” Lin Qingyu asked, perplexed.

“Comfort and a hug,” Gu Fuzhou said candidly.

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say back to that.

“I’m sure you won’t hug me, but comfort would be nice, at least.” Gu Fuzhou slumped on the desk listlessly. “I’m so tired.”

Lin Qingyu glanced around. It was almost curfew, and they were the only people in the library. He was the only one allowed to see Gu Fuzhou’s “salted fish” side—that way, the general’s dignity was preserved.

Gu Fuzhou was right, though; Lin Qingyu *didn’t* want to hug him. Still, comforting him was fine. His hand lightly covered Gu Fuzhou’s, which the general had placed casually on the desk.

Gu Fuzhou’s eyes widened slightly in shock. He was an eighteen-year-old boy in a thirty-year-old man’s body, after all.

Feeling Gu Fuzhou’s hand gradually stiffen under his, Lin Qingyu smiled. “Just bear with it a while longer,” he said gently. “Once everything goes as planned, we can have the new emperor transfer you to a ceremonial

post, and you can earn a high salary without attending court meetings or discussing political affairs. You can sleep in as long as you want every day, drink wine and admire flowers while you're awake, and go back for a nap when you're tired. Does that sound good?"

Only one word came out of Gu Fuzhou's mouth—a stark contrast to his long rant mere moments earlier. "Yes."

Lin Qingyu let go of Gu Fuzhou's hand and caressed his hair. "And you won't go bald, don't worry." Before Gu Fuzhou could get a word in edgewise, Lin Qingyu continued, "Even if you do, I'll make sure your hair grows back."

Gu Fuzhou wasn't even sure where to position his hands—he didn't want to flail in front of Lin Qingyu. Doing his best to appear charming, he teased, "If you can really do that, you'd get rich overnight if you visited my hometown."

When the emperor's efforts to arrange a marriage for Gu Fuzhou persisted, it left the general no choice but to evade the topic with perfunctory excuses. He said that he preferred gentle Jiangnan women over the capital's magnificent noblewomen. But then, after the empress handpicked several aristocratic ladies from Jiangnan for him, he told her that he was most enamored with the straightforward candor of women from the northwest.

Gu Fuzhou kept stalling for time until Zhu Yongxin finally reached the capital, escorted by guards from the general's residence. These guards were skilled, trustworthy, and most importantly, loyal to Gu Fuzhou.

It was there in the general's home that Lin Qingyu, along with Gu Fuzhou, met the butcher who could completely change Shen Huaishi's life.

Zhu Yongxin was a man in his thirties with an unassuming appearance, easily forgettable to the average person. Given that he'd had a brush with death, this forced visit to the capital didn't ruffle him in the slightest. He spoke to Gu Fuzhou and Lin Qingyu without being either haughty or overly humble; he even let out a chuckle. "I never expected that I, a mere butcher, would be granted such a privilege—a man so beautiful, and General Gu himself, seeing me off before my death. Quite a lucky thing, if you ask me!"

"Before your death, you say?" Gu Fuzhou looked down at Zhu Yongxin coldly from his spacious chair of the finest wood, exuding the fearsome aura of a man accustomed to power and prestige. "What makes you think you'll end up dead?"

"Why would you have me escorted here from so far away if not to punish me for what the Tianji Guard did to you?" Zhu Yongxin asked nonchalantly.

"You seem to have prepared yourself for your death long ago," Lin Qingyu remarked. "If that's the case, you should've shown your master loyalty by dying with him when the Tianyu Sect was exterminated. Why did you run away?"

"How did you know I belonged to the Tianyu Sect?!" Zhu Yongxin asked, shocked.

"Even if you didn't die with your master, you could've stayed in the Tianji Guard and waited for a chance to avenge your former sect," Lin Qingyu continued derisively. "I heard that everyone in the Tianyu Sect committed to dying for their cause, but now I know that was nothing but a lie."

Zhu Yongxin guffawed. “What use was I alone, when even the Tianyu Sect’s young master joined the Tianji Guard?”

“Shen Huaishi didn’t defect to the enemy,” Gu Fuzhou said. “He merely believed what the crown prince told him—that the Tianyu Sect was extinguished by an alliance of its enemies in the martial world. He also thinks that the crown prince saved his life.”

This stunned Zhu Yongxin. “He does?”

“I can arrange for you and Shen Huaishi to meet,” Lin Qingyu said. “He’s currently a member of the Tianji Guard, as well as a shadow guard protecting the crown prince at close quarters. He’s capable of doing much more for your cause than you are.”

Zhu Yongxin had long wanted to tell Shen Huaishi the truth, so he readily agreed to meet him. “I’ll tell the young master everything!”

“Everything? What use will it be to tell him the truth about the emperor being behind his sect’s devastation, and the crown prince getting cold feet and regretting his actions against the Tianyu Sect?” Lin Qingyu sneered. “You know your young master well, don’t you? Considering his devotion to the crown prince, these pieces of information alone could prevent him from taking action. I fear that he’d feel conflicted and tormented after hearing these so-called truths from you, then decide to forgive everyone and return to working for the Tianji Guard and crown prince.”

The sight of Lin Qingyu’s sneer—as evil as his face was strikingly beautiful—set Gu Fuzhou’s heart on fire.

“You’re going to tell Shen Huaishi that the emperor wasn’t involved in any of this. It was Xiao Cheng who presented the lives of the entire Tianyu Sect on a silver platter to the emperor to demonstrate his loyalty and secure

his position as crown prince." Lin Qingyu bent down and whispered in Zhu Yongxin's ear. "*That* is the truth. Do you understand?"

Lin Qingyu's eyes were deep, frigid pools that drowned whoever beheld them. Zhu Yongxin's gaze gradually unfocused. "I understand," he murmured, his tone docile.

"Good." Lin Qingyu straightened up and had Huantong usher Zhu Yongxin out.

Gu Fuzhou watched him with a smile. "When did you learn how to change the plot, Imperial Physician Lin?"

"As if I needed to *learn* that," Lin Qingyu replied indifferently. "You can do it with nothing but your own two hands."

For his part, Gu Fuzhou had been confused by the plot when he read *Huai's Revenge on the Monarch*. If Xiao Cheng valued nothing more than the throne and hadn't yet fallen in love with Shen Huaishi, then how come he suddenly couldn't bear to wipe out the Tianyu Sect?

Then he came to a realization—if the author wanted to give the couple a happy ending, of course they wouldn't go too far. Not doing so would make it easier to play down Xiao Cheng's involvement in the massacre. Their thought process had probably gone like this: *So I wrote that there's a blood-soaked feud between them? Well, it's not* that *bad. Xiao Cheng regrets everything he did in the end, right? It was the emperor who gave the Tianji Guard those orders, not Xiao Cheng. So it's totally fine to give them a happy ending!*

Lin Qingyu had seen through these cliché developments, however. If they completely quashed any argument that made Xiao Cheng out to be better

than he really was, then Shen Huaishi would have one less excuse to show the crown prince mercy.

"I'm going to take a bath," Lin Qingyu said.

"During the daytime?" Gu Fuzhou thought over what had happened. "You were standing so close to Zhu Yongxin. Did you do anything to him?"

"I planted a gu on him so that he won't prattle on and disrupt our plan," Lin Qingyu said coolly. "If Shen Huaishi still can't bear to kill Xiao Cheng even after everything Zhu Yongxin will tell him, then he's a pathetic excuse for a man."

Chapter 59

ONCE LIN QINGYU WAS promoted to fifth-rank court physician, he and Chu Zhengde took the emperor's pulse daily. Lin Qingyu was allowed to enter and leave the emperor's bedchambers, but the Eastern Palace was still off-limits. If he neared its grounds, the guards on duty hounded him with questions.

He wasn't worried, though. So long as he and Shen Huaishi were both in the palace, they'd eventually bump into each other.

Chu Zhengde had grown older and thus couldn't work as hard as he would've liked. After catching a cold, he took a few days off to recuperate, leaving Lin Qingyu the only court physician attending to the emperor.

When the emperor's migraines recurred that night, Lin Qingyu—who happened to be on duty—was immediately summoned to the emperor's bedchambers. The bedservant sleeping with the emperor that night was the young man whom Lin Qingyu had seen previously. The emperor couldn't do anything strenuous while he was sick, so he'd just had the bedservant warm his bed and pour him tea.

After acupuncture from Lin Qingyu, the emperor's headache subsided. The emperor opened his eyes to see his bedservant and Lin Qingyu both standing beside his bed.

"Your Majesty," the former called softly, his eyes red.

Lin Qingyu, on the other hand, remained calm and collected. "Autumn is fast approaching, so yang energies will wane as yin energies rise. We should alter your prescription according to the changing balance between

those energies, Your Majesty," he explained. "I'll return to the department and write out a new prescription right away."

"I have a brush and paper here. Write it now and show it to me," the emperor commanded out of nowhere.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lin Qingyu said after a pause.

The emperor sat up, helped by his bedservant, and watched as the beauty clad in official robes wrote under the lamplight, the young physician's thick eyelashes fluttering like butterfly wings. His haughty, cold disposition did nothing to dull his captivating allure, and the beauty mark under his eye provoked an irresistible wave of desire.

But that was all the emperor felt—desire. He was old and plagued with illness, and it had been a long time since a new face joined his harem. After his health improved a little, he could perhaps summon this imperial physician to his quarters to feast his eyes on. Not now, though; even if he wanted to, he didn't have the energy.

Once Lin Qingyu finished writing the prescription, he was told to leave. As he walked out of the bedchamber behind Xue Ying, he looked back at the bright-yellow canopy of His Majesty's bed, and sharp coldness seeped into his darkening gaze.

It seemed that the emperor would eventually lay a hand on Lin Qingyu, even if he didn't end up ordering Gu Fuzhou to marry.

Hearing that the emperor's migraines had returned, Xiao Cheng rushed over in the dead of night to demonstrate filial piety. He happened across Lin Qingyu, who was just leaving His Majesty's bedchambers. Lin Qingyu glanced at the crown prince before his gaze fell on Shen Huaishi behind him.

When Shen Huaishi looked back, Xiao Cheng snapped coldly, “Seen your fill?”

Shen Huaishi quickly glanced elsewhere. “I would never dare look, Your Highness.”

Xiao Cheng sneered. “Why not? Xiao-Qingyu was born with a face that could drive any man mad. If the opportunity to look at his face arises, you should take it. Who knows? Perhaps you won’t get the chance to see him in the future.” He shook out his sleeves with a derisive scoff, then headed into the emperor’s bedchambers after Xue Ying.

Another eunuch approached Lin Qingyu, carrying a lantern. “I’ll walk you back to the department, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Shen Huaishi could only wait outside the emperor’s chambers for Xiao Cheng. As Lin Qingyu passed the shadow guard, he said under his breath, “Make time to visit my residence.”

Shen Huaishi flinched in surprise. After a covert glance in the direction of the emperor’s chambers, he made a soft sound of acknowledgment.

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Shen Huaishi didn’t make Lin Qingyu wait too long. At midnight three days later, Lin Qingyu looked up from making medicine to see Shen Huaishi standing in front of the window.

“Imperial Physician Lin.” Shen Huaishi seemed nervous when Lin Qingyu opened the door and told him to come in. “I can’t stay for long. If His

Highness finds out that I'm still talking to you… What did you need me for, Imperial Physician?"

"I've found the person you seek," Lin Qingyu told him.

A stunned silence later, Shen Huaishi blurted in shock, "You mean that jade plaque's owner?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Come on out," he said.

The door to the secret room in the study slowly opened with a thud, and Zhu Yongxin walked out. "Young Master."

Shen Huaishi's eyes widened in disbelief. "Zhu-dage?!"

Few people in the Tianyu Sect knew that Zhu Yongxin had infiltrated the Tianji Guard as a spy, but Shen Huaishi did. After joining the Tianji Guard, he'd tried to find Zhu Yongxin, only to hear news of his death.

"Zhu-dage, I thought that you…" Shen Huaishi's eyes reddened. Even the strongest assassin was overcome by emotion upon meeting an old friend. "It's really you! I thought you were dead!"

Zhu Yongxin seemed much calmer than the shadow guard. "I'm not dead, no," he intoned, his gaze darkening. "I could never die before taking my revenge!"

"Revenge?" Shen Huaishi appeared lost. "The Chiya Sect, which orchestrated the Tianyu Sect's destruction, was wiped out by the Tianji Guard three years ago. His Highness himself gave the order!"

"His Highness? Ha!" Zhu Yongxin cackled sardonically. "As if a mere demonic order like the Chiya Sect could destroy a cadre working for the emperor overnight! Have you never doubted that, Young Master?"

“Traitors from the Chiya Sect were found in the Tianyu Sect. That’s why…”

Zhu Yongxin cut him off. “The imperial court offered the Chiya Sect amnesty long before that. They also orchestrated that bloody massacre. It wasn’t that the Tianyu Sect harbored traitors—it was the imperial court who turned their backs on us. Those masks that supposedly belonged to members of the Chiya Sect were worn by the Tianji Guard all along!”

Blood drained from Shen Huaishi’s face. “The imperial court? But the Tianyu Sect was always loyal. Why would they…?”

Lin Qingyu spoke up. “Was the Tianyu Sect loyal to the royal court or the crown prince? If it was the latter, do you think the emperor would’ve tolerated that?”

A faint glimmer of hope flickered in Shen Huaishi’s eyes. “It was the emperor, then?” he murmured. “His Majesty wanted to kill us?”

“Yes, it was the emperor who wanted to wipe us out,” Zhu Yongxin said. “But his obedient son knew what His Majesty wanted and dealt with us before the emperor could issue his own orders. He gained the emperor’s favor and received the title of crown prince, just as he had always desperately desired!”

Pain spread in Shen Huaishi’s body from head to toe, almost making him stumble. Then the faint fragrance of herbs wafted over as someone grasped his arm. He looked up to see the curve of Lin Qingyu’s face.

“That’s impossible.” Shen Huaishi gripped Lin Qingyu’s arm as well. “His Highness would never do that, Imperial Physician Lin…”

“Shocked?” Lin Qingyu asked in a low voice. “Do you think Xiao Cheng wouldn’t have done this?”

Shen Huaishi shook his head. “Proof. I need proof.”

Zhu Yongxin fished out half of a mask from his roughly spun garments and tossed it onto the desk. “I found this on a Tianji Guard assassin after the Tianyu Sect was wiped out.”

This mask was of a monstrous face with dark-green skin and sharp fangs; it was unique to the Chiya Sect, and it was stained brown with old blood. The sight of it pierced Shen Huaishi’s eyes; it felt as if blood would flow out of their sockets.

“Huaishi, look at me.”

Shen Huaishi was stunned. He hadn’t heard anyone address him like that for so long. He thought of his father and brother—before they were killed, they used to call him by name.

The captivating force in Lin Qingyu’s eyes sucked him in. “You always had many doubts about what really happened three years ago, didn’t you? How could another martial sect easily wipe out the Tianyu Sect, powerful as it was? And why did Xiao Cheng show up immediately afterward? Why was he there at the right moment to save your life?

“After the Tianyu Sect’s destruction, Xiao Cheng treated you well, didn’t he? He was so kind to you that you fell in love with him. You were infatuated up to the point when the North King asked for Princess Jingchun’s hand in marriage. I’m right, aren’t I? Do you still not understand?”

Dead silence filled the room until it was interrupted by the windows creaking in the wind. Looking as though he’d awoken from a long dream,

Shen Huaishi shoved Lin Qingyu aside and turned to leave.

"Where are you going? To confront Xiao Cheng?" Lin Qingyu asked coldly. "Who do you think you are? You're merely a shadow guard. You put your life on the line for him and let him take out his sexual urges on you, even after wiping out your sect! Why would he come clean to you? If he could lie to you once, he can lie to you a second time. What do you want to hear from him?"

Shen Huaishi stood still, clenching his trembling hands into fists.

"If I were you, I wouldn't give him the chance to argue," Lin Qingyu said more gently. "You always say that I look down on you. That's because I detest people who sell themselves short."

In the blink of an eye, Shen Huaishi leapt out of the window, leaving not a single trace of his presence.

Lin Qingyu had done what he needed to do. Now, they could only wait.

However much disdain Xiao Cheng held for Shen Huaishi, he placed great trust in his shadow guard. There were many ways in which Shen Huaishi could assassinate Xiao Cheng and escape unscathed. He could bring his knife down on Xiao Cheng's neck as he slept; or cover the prince's mouth from behind while he read a memorial, put his arms around his neck, and suffocate him; or come to Lin Qingyu for poison, then pour it into tea Xiao Cheng would drink—Lin Qingyu would be sure to pick the concoction which best suited the crown prince.

Just imagining that delighted Lin Qingyu.

Shen Huaishi… He better not end up a disappointment.

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One night, Hu Ji returned to the department after treating a patient to see Lin Qingyu tinkering with a ceramic urn. Curious, Hu Ji craned his neck to look. “What’s that, Imperial Physician Lin?” he asked.

“A golden silkworm.”

Catching sight of the golden silkworm, Hu Ji gave it a wide berth. “Why did you breed that?”

Lin Qingyu covered the urn. “Its wings are a medicinal ingredient,” he explained casually.

Hu Ji forced a laugh. “I see.”

“Did you come back from the Directorate of Ceremonial?” Lin Qingyu asked. “Have you heard any news?”

“News?” Hu Ji thought about that for a while. “Oh—I heard something from the eunuch who delivers flowers from the greenhouse to the Eastern Palace. Apparently, His Highness has been foul-tempered these past couple of days. The eunuch thinks it’s because the shadow guard who was always with the crown prince has disappeared.”

As I expected. Someone as stubborn as Shen Huaishi would need time to come to terms with the information he’d learned. Lin Qingyu wondered what realizations he’d reached in the few days he’d been gone.

In *Huai’s Revenge on the Monarch*, Shen Huaishi had held his knife to Xiao Cheng’s throat after hearing the truth. Now that he’d heard a much more brutal so-called truth, he’d probably respond in a more gratifying way, wouldn’t he?

The palace was strangely quiet that night. As the hours passed, all the imperial physicians on duty nodded off.

Then a palace maid stumbled into the Department of Imperial Physicians, her shrill, frantic sobs breaking the silence: “Imperial physicians! The Eastern Palace calls for imperial physicians!”

Startled into wakefulness, everyone quickly rose from their seats, save for Lin Qingyu. He just sat there, his brow slightly furrowed. *Why did the palace summon physicians? Is Xiao Cheng clinging to life?*

Everyone knew that the crown prince was healthy. If the Eastern Palace had called for imperial physicians this late at night, then the prince had probably fallen acutely ill; judging from how harried the palace maid had looked, he was in dire condition.

As the imperial physician overseeing the Eastern Palace, Hu Ji approached the situation with caution. He shouldered his medicine chest and made to leave, only for Lin Qingyu to call after him, “Imperial Physician Hu?”

“Need anything, Imperial Physician Lin?” Hu Ji asked anxiously.

After momentary hesitation, Lin Qingyu replied, “Nothing. You can go.”

After Hu Ji left, a few more imperial physicians headed out to the Eastern Palace. As the court physician attending the emperor, though, Lin Qingyu was to stay in the department on standby.

Even after dawn broke, Hu Ji and the others didn’t come back. The Eastern Palace remained lit throughout the night, and people entered without leaving. No news came overnight, as if the Eastern Palace was locked down.

After Lin Qingyu's shift ended early that morning, he left the palace, preoccupied. The moment he stepped out the gates, someone called, "Imperial Physician Lin."

It was Gu Fuzhou. He was clad in a military official's robes; he was probably there for a court meeting.

Lin Qingyu walked briskly over. "General."

Gu Fuzhou's gaze was bleary, as if he wasn't fully awake yet. "You must be hungry after your night shift. I brought some food for you; finish it in the carriage while it's still hot."

Lin Qingyu took the layered wooden case Gu Fuzhou handed over. "Thank you, General."

When Gu Fuzhou noticed Lin Qingyu's bad mood, his drowsiness vanished. Lowering his voice, he asked, "What happened? Did Shen Huaishi do anything?"

"Shen Huaishi struck, but I think he must have held back. Otherwise, he could've taken Xiao Cheng's life in one attack." Lin Qingyu gazed downward, concealing his roiling emotions. His arms tightened around the wooden box. "If Xiao Cheng is lucky enough to survive this…"

Gu Fuzhou contemplated that. Then his brow relaxed, and a smile bloomed on his face. "We don't yet know anything about the crown prince's condition. Even if he survives, I'll work hard and come up with a better plan for you." Gu Fuzhou's wide palm covered the back of Lin Qingyu's head. "Don't worry. It's not a big deal. Go back to sleep, and remember to eat something first. I'll come keep you company after the meeting."

Chapter 60

LIN QINGYU DIDN'T HAVE MUCH of an appetite, but he did as Gu Fuzhou had said and opened the layered box in the carriage. The topmost section held freshly baked flatbread, the crispy, golden-brown surface still steaming. As he nibbled on a piece of flatbread, Lin Qingyu thought over everything that had happened the previous night once more, rearranging pieces of information into a coherent train of thought.

If he hadn't known the truth in advance, he'd have assumed that Xiao Cheng had been afflicted with an acute disease. After all, although the crown prince's situation seemed severe, the imperial guards had yet to take action. If the crown prince was assassinated, they were supposed to search the entire palace, weren't they? So why had they only locked down the Eastern Palace?

What had Shen Huaishi done to Xiao Cheng? Had he escaped successfully? Where was he now?

Lin Qingyu knew that dwelling on these questions wouldn't benefit him. All he could do now was wait and observe any future developments.

At noon, Gu Fuzhou rushed to Lin Qingyu's residence. He didn't vault over a wall this time; instead, he openly came in through the main entrance. Huantong was so excited to see the war god he admired that his hands shook as he served the guest tea.

Noticing how Huantong's eyes shone with excitement, Gu Fuzhou made a show of being serious and stony-faced as he asked whether Huantong wanted his autograph.

Lin Qingyu had to applaud Gu Fuzhou's willingness to tease and make fun at such a dire time. He dismissed the bewildered Huantong, then asked, "How are things in the palace?"

Gu Fuzhou drank some tea. "Xiao Cheng didn't attend this morning's court meeting. The excuse provided was that he's unwell, and the prime minister presided over the meeting. Everything else was apparently the same as always, but the atmosphere in the palace feels off—like the calm before a storm."

"He's unwell? How unwell? Still conscious?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"I don't know the answer to that," Gu Fuzhou said.

The fact that several imperial physicians had remained at the Eastern Palace throughout the night indicated that Xiao Cheng was so severely injured that his life was at risk. Who had ordered that the Eastern Palace be locked down and that the prime minister preside over the morning meeting in the crown prince's stead? Was it the emperor?

"I asked some guards on duty, and they haven't received any news since last night. They haven't heard about an assassin either," Gu Fuzhou continued. "That means that neither Xiao Cheng nor the emperor want word of this to spread."

Lin Qingyu nodded in agreement. The emperor's condition had improved somewhat, but he was limited to reading memorials and meeting with his aides in his bedchambers, as well as having the final say in crucial matters. He'd entrusted everything else to Xiao Cheng.

If any misfortune befell the crown prince—who was essentially governing the nation—while the emperor was so sickly, it would leave the officials leaderless and thrust the nation into unrest. In the emperor's

position, Lin Qingyu would also have forbidden anyone to spread word of this assassination; he would also have ordered the Tianji Guard to investigate covertly.

The more Lin Qingyu thought about it, the more frustrated he became. "If Xiao Cheng died on the spot, things would've been much less complicated," he said, massaging his temples. "Couldn't Shen Huaishi have done better for once? Just for once?"

"Maybe he didn't get cold feet on the spot, and he failed for some other reason." Gu Fuzhou laughed. "Qingyu, have you heard about the retrospective method of deduction?"

Lin Qingyu hadn't heard of that, but he had a sense of what Gu Fuzhou was getting at. "What do you have in mind?"

Gu Fuzhou pulled him up. "We'll reenact what might've happened, with you as Xiao Cheng and me as Shen Huaishi," he said eagerly. "Maybe this will help you straighten things out."

Lin Qingyu sat back down. "How silly."

"I'll be Xiao Cheng, then? And you'll be Shen Huaishi?"

Before Lin Qingyu could tell him how tiresome this seemed, Gu Fuzhou sat on the bottom bunk, gave him a sidelong glance, and started the scenario with a perfect imitation of Xiao Cheng. "Why are you still standing there? Did you forget how to satisfy me in bed, even though it's only been a few days since you disappeared?"

That struck Lin Qingyu speechless.

Gu Fuzhou had proposed doing this to help Lin Qingyu relax, but he realized helplessly that it wasn't working. While he brainstormed other ways

to cheer Lin Qingyu up, Lin Qingyu said, “Shen Huaishi had been gone for two days at that point, so Xiao Cheng should’ve started by asking where he’d been, right?”

Smiling, Gu Fuzhou rectified his mistake. “Where did you go for the past two days?”

Lin Qingyu strode slowly to the front of the bed, running through possible responses from Shen Huaishi in his head. If the shadow guard had failed to kill Xiao Cheng in one move, then he’d very likely given Xiao Cheng a chance to deny his involvement in the massacre. “I…I want to ask you something. I hope you can give me an answer.”

Gu Fuzhou narrowed his eyes. “Not before you tell me where you went.”

Lin Qingyu pressed his lips together, a storm brewing in his eyes. Suddenly, something tightened around his waist—it was Gu Fuzhou’s arm, pulling him down. Lin Qingyu fell onto the bed; he wanted to free himself, but then he figured that Xiao Cheng would have done what Gu Fuzhou had, so he lay there and let Gu Fuzhou bear down on him.

Gu Fuzhou pushed himself up with one arm, his other hand seizing Lin Qingyu’s jaw. “A mere two days, and you’ve grown so disobedient,” he said coldly. “I asked you a question! Have you gone deaf? Did you hit your head? Can’t you hear me?!”

Gu Fuzhou didn’t put all his weight on Lin Qingyu—his muscular body hovered above—and he didn’t grip Lin Qingyu’s jaw too hard either. Lin Qingyu could easily have pushed his hand away, just as Shen Huaishi could easily have freed himself from Xiao Cheng.

But would Shen Huaishi have done that? Obeying Xiao Cheng's orders came instinctively to the shadow guard, who was disciplined and trained until he became accustomed to appeasing another man in bed. He'd probably need more time to break free from his shackles and reject his instincts.

Thinking that, Lin Qingyu didn't try to free himself; he merely cowered further back.

He actually didn't know whether Shen Huaishi would cower from Xiao Cheng; he was the one who wanted to keep a distance between himself and Gu Fuzhou. They'd embraced before, but this was their first time lying one atop the other in the same bed.

From this angle, Lin Qingyu could take in the curve of Gu Fuzhou's throat and his sharp, defined jawline. He was so much smaller than Gu Fuzhou, whose scent enveloped him from head to toe. This feeling—that of being dominated and controlled—flustered him for no reason.

"You insist on keeping silent? Very well." Gu Fuzhou's breathing grew ragged. "I have lots of ways to force your mouth open."

He stopped moving, and Lin Qingyu feigned calm. "What are they?"

Gu Fuzhou looked down at the beauty mark under Lin Qingyu's eye. After collecting himself for a while, he said, "I'll skip five hundred words along these lines: 'I'll ravish and have my way with you until your clothes are rumpled and your long hair is undone…'"

Since he respected Lin Qingyu, he would never yank on his clothes. But touching his hair wouldn't be that out of line, would it? Gu Fuzhou removed the hairpin holding Lin Qingyu's hair up, and the ebony tresses

came undone, cascading down Lin Qingyu's shoulders like a waterfall that enhanced his captivating beauty.

Gu Fuzhou set the hairpin beside the pillow. "While Shen Huaishi agonized over the truth behind the Tianyu Sect's destruction, Xiao Cheng subjected him to relentless physical humiliation. That finally smashed the subservience Shen Huaishi had developed over the years to smithereens—he awakened, ready to revolt!"

Such an emotional shift would be within reason, Lin Qingyu concluded, trying to push Gu Fuzhou away.

But Gu Fuzhou pressed closer and closer. "What're you hiding from? I've fucked you so many times—why are you still afraid?" Gu Fuzhou continued, his voice deep. "There's nothing to fear. You won't need to bear any pain—I'm not at all big down there." After trying and failing to stifle it, he burst out into laughter. "Sorry, sorry. I ruined the scene."

Lin Qingyu pushed his palms against Gu Fuzhou's chest, raising a brow. "Would Xiao Cheng say that about himself? He'd probably say the exact opposite."

"You needn't care about such details." Gu Fuzhou chuckled quietly. "Go on."

Lin Qingyu's gaze darkened as he suddenly rolled atop Gu Fuzhou. Now straddling the "crown prince," he picked up the hairpin by the pillow and held it against Gu Fuzhou's throat. "How was the Tianyu Sect destroyed three years ago?"

Gu Fuzhou's smile vanished. "Did someone say something to you?" he asked in extreme shock. "If you dare attack me, Shen Huaishi, I won't show you any mercy!"

“I only have one question—who was it that annihilated the Tianyu Sect that night?” Lin Qingyu demanded again. “The Chiya Sect, or the Tianji Guard? Tell me!”

“Where did you hear that from?!” Gu Fuzhou snarled.

“Tell me! I want only the truth!”

“The truth?” Gu Fuzhou scoffed. “The truth is that you should’ve died with the Tianyu Sect! I saved you and did all I could to keep you alive! What more do you want?”

Lin Qingyu grew more immersed in the act, putting himself in Shen Huaishi’s shoes. “Everything I heard is true, then. It was the Tianji Guard who… It was *you*!”

Gu Fuzhou seized Lin Qingyu's wrist. "When a cadre of assassins under the imperial court's purview loses the emperor's trust, it is destined to die," he snapped. "No one could have saved them, not even me. Sparing your life alone was already…"

"Silence!" Lin Qingyu gripped the hairpin tightly, pushing its tip down into Gu Fuzhou's throat and almost piercing his flesh. "I'll never believe you again! Die!"

They'd reached the climax of their scenario—and, at the worst time possible, Huantong's voice called to them from outside the door. "It's time for your dinner, Young Master. By the way, is Great General Gu staying for a meal?"

Gu Fuzhou and Lin Qingyu traded looks.

"Perhaps Shen Huaishi was interrupted too," Gu Fuzhou said.

"Maybe." Lin Qingyu climbed off the general. "And that frightened Shen Huaishi, so he missed and then didn't have time to finish him off."

"You sound more and more like someone from my hometown by the day." Gu Fuzhou remained prone; he couldn't be bothered to move. "We're just guessing, though. Only Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi know what happened that night, I think. Let's just wait—we'll have news in no time."

"The Eastern Palace servants keep secrets well," Lin Qingyu said pensively. "If we want information, we'll have to depend on Hu Ji or Xiaosongzi."

"Who's Xiaosongzi?"

"A eunuch at Qinzheng Hall. He's told me a lot of things."

“I’d expect that from someone named Xiao*song*zi—he’s as chatty as a songbird,” Gu Fuzhou joked.

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say to that.

Having heard no answer, Huantong asked, “Young Master, are you in there?”

“Will you stay for dinner?” Lin Qingyu asked Gu Fuzhou.

“Suuure,” Gu Fuzhou said, drawing out the word. “I can eat three big bowls of rice per meal—and have Huantong prepare extra meat.”

Lin Qingyu’s hair was still undone, so he gave Huantong orders with the door closed. Lacking a mirror, he attempted to tie his hair up a few times, but to no avail. He couldn’t keep himself from complaining, “You could’ve reenacted the scene without taking out my hairpin.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t help myself,” Gu Fuzhou said with a chuckle. “Here, let me give you a hand.”

As Lin Qingyu sat by his desk, letting Gu Fuzhou style his hair, something occurred to him. “Oh—let me touch your abdominal muscles.”

“I didn’t expect you to ask to feel my abs,” Gu Fuzhou said in gratified surprise. “Come on. Don’t be shy. Touch away.”

Lin Qingyu ran his hand over Gu Fuzhou’s abdomen a few times. “I wasn’t wrong, then.”

“About what?”

“Those muscles aren’t as firm as before,” Lin Qingyu joked.

Astounded, Gu Fuzhou touched his abdomen. “Impossible! I lift weights daily!”

“I’ve heard that, to build all that muscle, Great General Gu used to exercise at the training ground in the capital for eight hours a day. How long do you spend lifting weights daily?”

“About an hour,” Gu Fuzhou said, his tone sullen.

“You should take care of your figure, Old General Gu,” Lin Qingyu replied blandly.

Chapter 61

LIN QINGYU SPENT the entire day at home, and no news came from the palace. He had Huantong visit Hu Ji's residence for information, but Hu Ji had yet to return; he was very likely still on standby in the Eastern Palace.

The next night, Lin Qingyu headed to the Department of Imperial Physicians for his shift. Some of the physicians who had dashed over to the Eastern Palace returned, only to hurry to their next destination with strained faces, refusing to divulge much about the crown prince's condition. His several attempts to get answers from them all yielded the same response—that the crown prince had fallen acutely ill and needed to recuperate for a few days.

They were taking Lin Qingyu for a fool. He didn't get to read the prescriptions they made out, but a look at which herbs had been taken from the inventory told him that Xiao Cheng had suffered severe external injuries—most likely on his chest or abdomen—and continual blood loss.

Hu Ji finally returned the next day, so worn out that he was practically in a trance. His robes had gone unwashed for the past three days, and his sleeves were bloodstained.

Lin Qingyu offered to give Hu Ji a ride. In the carriage, Hu Ji told Lin Qingyu that the crown prince wasn't sick; rather, he'd been incapacitated by a sword wound.

"When I hurried over to the Eastern Palace that night, the crown prince had already been carried to his bed, wearing only his nightclothes. Blood streamed down his body from a gaping wound on his chest, and his eyes were

wide open. He was conscious, but he couldn't speak." Hu Ji grew fearful as he recalled the scene. "I rushed forward to try and staunch the bleeding, but His Highness grabbed the collar of my robes. I heard him say 'Come back here!' before he passed out. When I left, he was still unconscious."

Lin Qingyu didn't care what Xiao Cheng had said before he fainted. He just wanted to know when the crown prince would die. "What are the odds that you can help him regain consciousness?"

Hu Ji shook his head, grimacing. "Less than one in three."

One in three... That probability was still too high.

"His Highness's left lung was punctured," Hu Ji added. "Even if he somehow survives this, he'll probably have to take medicine for the rest of his life."

Still, Lin Qingyu felt dissatisfied. So what if the crown prince's left lung was punctured? If Shen Huaishi had thrust his sword just a bit to the side and pierced Xiao Cheng's heart, *that* would've been good news.

After a brief pause, Lin Qingyu asked, "Hu Ji, do you always treat your patients to the best of your ability, whoever they may be?"

"Of course. I abide by that tenet as a physician," Hu Ji answered without hesitating.

Lin Qingyu said nothing more. Hu Ji had learned medicine to save lives and help the injured. Even if he had accepted a patient who'd committed unforgivably evil crimes, he'd probably save the criminal's life before handing them over to the authorities.

On the other hand, Lin Qingyu was studying medicine, and learning the arts of poison-making and gu breeding, simply because those things

interested him—and he wouldn't hesitate to use the knowledge he'd gained to do harm. Despite that, he respected Hu Ji's ideals and didn't want to tarnish them.

More to the point, the other imperial physicians would certainly notice if Hu Ji did anything to the crown prince. Every bowl of medicine in the Eastern Palace would be tested for poison, and the slightest misstep might implicate Hu Ji. Conspiracy to murder the crown prince was a crime punishable by death—even the perpetrator's family would be executed. Thus, Lin Qingyu decided he must not strike thoughtlessly, if just for his family's sake.

Have I no choice but to let fate run its course?

Hu Ji was so exhausted that he couldn't keep his eyes open, but he remembered to remind Lin Qingyu, "By the way, the emperor issued an absolute command: This attempt to assassinate the crown prince must be kept confidential. You mustn't tell anyone else what I've told you, Imperial Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Don't worry, I won't breathe a word of it."

Despite having said that, he immediately relayed the news to Gu Fuzhou.

Gu Fuzhou came over all the time these days—even their relationship as godbrothers couldn't justify the frequency of his visits. Lin Qingyu didn't have the wherewithal to care about that for the moment, though.

When Gu Fuzhou heard that Xiao Cheng had a one-in-three chance of survival, he didn't seem optimistic. "If Hu Ji says that, then he actually has at least a nine-in-ten chance."

“How so?”

“Xiao Cheng was one of this novel’s main characters, and all main characters have something we call ‘plot armor,’” Gu Fuzhou explained. “Let me put it this way—even if you shot ten thousand arrows at Xiao Cheng at once, none of them would damage a single hair on his head.”

“So he has excellent luck, to put it simply?”

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “You could see it that way.”

“Shen Huaishi was also a main character. Does he have armor too?”

“Of course. He seems pitiful, but I’m sure he won’t die easily,” Gu Fuzhou said. “If anyone else attempted to assassinate the crown prince, the best-case scenario would be that they succeeded but got killed afterward. Shen Huaishi managed to escape, though, even after plunging his sword into Xiao Cheng’s chest. Isn’t that an example of his plot armor?”

Lin Qingyu seemed dubious. “Didn’t he escape the palace because he’s stealthy?”

As they chatted, Huantong ran up, bearing a slip of paper. A child he didn’t know had knocked on the residence’s door, and after Huantong opened it, pushed the slip of paper into his hand and scampered off before Huantong could register what had happened.

“It’s this paper?” Lin Qingyu asked. “I’ll take a look.”

It was a note bearing a scant few words, and after reading it, Lin Qingyu had Huantong arrange for a carriage immediately. “I’m heading to Changsheng Temple.”

Lin Qingyu changed into everyday robes before leaving for the temple with Gu Fuzhou. When they arrived, he told Gu Fuzhou, “Maybe you ought

to wait for me here."

"Hm? Why?"

"Numerous pilgrims from different places visit this temple. Do you want them to see you arrive and leave with a male widow?"

Gu Fuzhou pretended to think about it. "Kind of."

Lin Qingyu couldn't suppress his chuckle. "Well, let's go together, then."

The autumn rain sprinkled them, beginning to dampen their robes. Gu Fuzhou stepped down from the carriage and opened an umbrella before extending his palm to Lin Qingyu, who placed his hand on it as he disembarked and steadied himself. Right after he let go of Gu Fuzhou's hand, someone harrumphed behind them. "How improper!"

Lin Qingyu turned back to see an elderly man glower at them, apparently disgusted. It was as though he'd been subjected to the sight of filth.

"Who's that?" Gu Fuzhou asked in a low voice.

"Deputy Censor-in-Chief Yang Geng."

"Despite his age, he's still fifth rank—the same as you," Gu Fuzhou drawled. "If I were him, I'd have written 'pathetic' on the hem of my trousers in my own blood."

As they whispered to each other, sharing an umbrella, Yang Geng covered his face with his sleeves, as if the sight of them physically pained him.

"Lord Yang," Gu Fuzhou called to him.

All the Imperial Censorate's members were stubbornly stodgy, and Yang Geng was no exception. He walked toward Gu Fuzhou and bowed, his displeasure evident. "Greetings from this minor official, Great General."

"Who were you calling 'improper' just now?" Gu Fuzhou asked.

"Not you, of course, General." Turning to Lin Qingyu, Yang Geng said reproachfully, "If I remember correctly, Imperial Physician Lin, Young Marquess Lu passed away less than a year ago. You should still be mourning him. How could you be so intimate with another man?"

"Imperial Physician Lin is my godbrother," Gu Fuzhou said.

"Yet he still isn't a family member by blood, General."

"The emperor isn't a blood relative of his either, but Imperial Physician Lin takes His Majesty's pulse every day. Following your logic, is His Majesty being improper as well?"

Yang Geng's eyes bulged. "That doesn't make sense, Great General," he argued furiously. "How could that possibly compare to—"

"Why doesn't it make sense?" Gu Fuzhou asked blandly. "His Majesty promoted Imperial Physician Lin himself. It doesn't bother him that Imperial Physician Lin once married a man, but you seem to be very concerned about that, so you should relay your concerns to the emperor and have him remove Imperial Physician Lin from his position."

"Uh…" Yang Geng had no argument ready. It was common knowledge within the palace that the emperor had regained consciousness thanks to Lin Qingyu. If Yang Geng were to submit a memorial suggesting that Lin Qingyu be discharged, it would seem as though he opposed the emperor's good

health. A censor of Great Yu wouldn't be executed for saying the wrong thing, but at this point, no one would dare propose Lin Qingyu's dismissal.

"Our business is our priority here, General," Lin Qingyu said. "Let's go."

On the way to the main hall, Gu Fuzhou was about to lambast Yang Geng again when he heard Lin Qingyu scoff, "Dickhead."

Gu Fuzhou froze. He thought he'd misheard. "What'd you just call him?"

"A dickhead?"

Gu Fuzhou was so shocked that he struggled to utter his next words. "How…how could you say that?"

"I learned it from you." Lin Qingyu glanced archly at him from the corner of his eye. "So you can say it, and I can't?"

"Naturally. Great beauties aren't allowed to curse."

"I won't stop doing it," Lin Qingyu said disdainfully.

Gu Fuzhou was beating himself up, agonized. "I led you astray."

It was raining, so there were fewer pilgrims at the temple than usual; only a few people were praying to the golden Buddha. Lin Qingyu looked around but didn't spot anything out of the ordinary. The writer of the note had told him they'd meet at Changsheng Temple, but Lin Qingyu assumed that they didn't intend to use the main hall for that meeting.

Just then, a young monk approached them and asked whether they wanted to offer prayers. Lin Qingyu took three sticks of incense from him.

"What are you praying for?" Gu Fuzhou asked.

Even in front of the Buddha, Lin Qingyu didn't bother to conceal his malice. "Xiao Cheng's early death."

"Cute," Gu Fuzhou said with a laugh. "But I don't think that prayers offered in Changsheng Temple are always fulfilled."

"Have you prayed here before?" Lin Qingyu asked offhandedly as he lit the sticks of incense.

"I have," Gu Fuzhou replied casually. "If my prayers came true, you'd never feel unhappy."

Lin Qingyu's heart pounded in his chest. He looked up at Gu Fuzhou beside him; Gu Fuzhou seemed not to realize what he'd just said, because he met Lin Qingyu's gaze, asking, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It's nothing." Lin Qingyu dropped his gaze. "I'm going to the side hall, where I met him last time."

Gu Fuzhou nodded. "I won't go with you, then." He hadn't really gotten acquainted with Shen Huaishi while in the general's body, and this wouldn't be a good time to meet him. "I'll swing by the rooms in the back and see whether Xu Junyuan is here."

"The Imperial Preceptor?" Lin Qingyu's brow furrowed slightly. "Are you going to tell him about…you?"

"Not that much. The most I'll do is have him divine my fate."

With that, they went their separate ways. Lin Qingyu walked to the side hall, which was quieter than the main hall; not a single monk kept watch over the area.

The side hall was where Lu Wancheng's spirit tablet had been enshrined and where eternal lamps were lit for him. As Lin Qingyu added oil

to those lamps, he saw a silhouette from the corner of his eye. He turned toward it. “I’m alone.”

Shen Huaishi walked out from behind a stone pillar. “Imperial Physician Lin,” he greeted Lin Qingyu woodenly.

Shen Huaishi sported the roughly spun clothes usually worn by commoners. He appeared disheveled, his unshaven face streaked with ash and his eyes bloodshot. It looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

“Where have you been these last few days?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Shen Huaishi seemed to not hear his question. As if uninterrupted, he continued, “Thank you for informing me about the truth behind the Tianyu Sect’s destruction, Imperial Physician.”

“Were you behind Xiao Cheng’s severe injuries?” Lin Qingyu pressed.

Something flickered in Shen Huaishi’s eyes at the mention of Xiao Cheng, but he still didn’t answer the question. “Please help Zhu-dage settle down in Xu Prefecture and give him a chance at a quiet life.”

“What about you? Where will you go?” Lin Qingyu said. “The Tianji Guard will inevitably try to track you down—can you evade them?”

The corners of Shen Huaishi’s mouth lifted into a forced smile. “Are… are you worried about me?” He hung his head. “No one aside from my family has ever cared about me. If I didn’t continue selling myself short, Imperial Physician Lin, would you come to see me as a friend?”

“Perhaps,” Lin Qingyu murmured.

A glimmer of light flashed in Shen Huaishi’s eyes; then they quickly dimmed once again. “It’s too late now, unfortunately.”

Lin Qingyu didn't say anything in response. Instead, he pulled a box of pills he'd prepared from inside his sleeve. "Take this."

"What are these?"

"Pills that'll help you feign death. You can use them to escape when necessary."

Shen Huaishi accepted the box. "Thank you. Well, then…" He looked intently at Lin Qingyu. "I'll take my leave."

As Lin Qingyu watched Shen Huaishi's receding back, he asked, "Did you miss that night? Or did you show him mercy?"

Stopping in his tracks, Shen Huaishi shook his head in silence, then strode out of the side hall. Even when he left, he hadn't given Lin Qingyu an answer.

Lin Qingyu stood there alone for a while before leaving as well. He spotted Gu Fuzhou under the eaves, staring pensively at the gauzy curtain of rain.

Droplets trickled down from the eaves, shattering on the mossy stone steps. The crisp sounds snapped Gu Fuzhou out of his trance. "Are you done? Did you meet with him?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "He told me some pointless drivel." He paused. "Well, not really. At any rate, he should be leaving the capital soon."

Gu Fuzhou laughed. "When Xiao Cheng wakes up, he's totally going to search for him. Shen Huaishi runs, and Xiao Cheng chases—but they're both between a rock and a hard place."

"You think Xiao Cheng will wake up?" Lin Qingyu snapped, displeased.

“Regardless of what happens to Xiao Cheng, we should prepare for the worst-case scenario.”

“The worst-case scenario is that he survives and remains crown prince. We couldn’t do anything to the emperor either in that case.”

The emperor obviously lusted after Lin Qingyu. He might tell the young physician to stay and satisfy him in bed any day now. It wasn’t just Gu Fuzhou who needed to remarry—it was Lin Qingyu too.

“We’ll have to start planning our remarriage,” Gu Fuzhou said, then double-checked, “Do you really not want to take me as your bride, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu considered it. “No.” Even if he had wanted to, a fifth-rank court physician taking a first-rank great general as his bride would boil down to a provocation aimed at the imperial censors.

Gu Fuzhou refused to relent. “Really? Even if you’d die if you didn’t?”

Lin Qingyu hesitated. “Mm.”

Gu Fuzhou couldn’t figure out what Lin Qingyu meant by that. “So are you willing to be *my* bride? You can’t be. You found wearing bridal robes and makeup demeaning, didn’t you?”

“Even if it’s demeaning, I’ve already worn them twice,” Lin Qingyu said blandly.

“Twice?” Gu Fuzhou asked in surprise. “Why twice?”

Lin Qingyu froze momentarily, then let out a quiet laugh. “I got it wrong.”

“Qingyu?” Gu Fuzhou was confused.

When Lin Qingyu wasn’t sneering, his smile was gentle and serene. And for some reason, Gu Fuzhou thought Lin Qingyu also looked wistful in

that moment.

Chapter 62

XIAO CHENG'S INCAPACITATION forced the emperor to manage the government's affairs, despite his own sickness. his migraines worsened, and only Lin Qingyu's acupuncture treatments could relieve his pain slightly. Not only did Lin Qingyu have to wait on standby at the emperor's bedchambers while on duty, but he'd occasionally be called to the palace on his days off.

The emperor saw Lin Qingyu as a gentle soul who rarely spoke unless necessary and always smelled faintly of medicine—pleasantly so, unlike Chu Zhengde, on whom the smell was a pungent odor. Lin Qingyu looked especially beautiful as he silently massaged and pressed the acupuncture points on the emperor's head, his gaze downcast and his flawless skin glowing faintly under the palace lamplight.

Now that the emperor saw Lin Qingyu often, the palace's other beauties seemed bland in comparison. It was a pity that the emperor was unwell and listless, without the wherewithal to summon his own lust, especially in the wake of the devastating disaster in the Eastern Palace. On occasions when Lin Qingyu's beauty captivated him, he could do nothing but appreciate it and sigh.

For the sake of his peace and quiet, the emperor no longer had consorts or concubines tend to him, leaving only Xue Ying and Lin Qingyu by his side.

One day, Lin Qingyu arrived at the emperor's bedchambers as ordered, only for Xue Ying to stop him at the entrance. "Please wait here, Imperial Physician Lin. His Majesty is in the middle of a meeting."

“Is it with the prime minister?” The prime minister, who now oversaw all state affairs, relayed any important matters to the emperor on the other officials’ behalf.

After jointly attending the emperor for months, Xue Ying and Lin Qingyu were well-acquainted with each other, so Xue Ying readily divulged the visitor’s identity: “He’s meeting with Lord Xie, the leader of the Tianji Guard.”

“I see,” Lin Qingyu replied mildly.

Lord Xie must’ve come to discuss the attempt on Xiao Cheng’s life. Shen Huaishi had vanished right after Xiao Cheng was injured, something the Tianji Guard had surely investigated. Lin Qingyu wondered what they’d found.

Lin Qingyu waited until Lord Xie left to enter the emperor’s bedchambers. The emperor sat behind his desk, looking solemn—it seemed the Tianji Guard hadn’t brought him good news.

The emperor told Lin Qingyu to forgo the formalities. “My headache is acting up again. Come over and give me a massage,” he ordered feebly.

Lin Qingyu went to stand behind the emperor and massaged his temples. The emperor relaxed and shut his eyes, enjoying the sensation. “You’re good at this.”

“I learned it all from my father,” Lin Qingyu replied. “His technique is miles better than mine.”

“Lin Rushan?” The emperor was reminded of the ex-head imperial physician who had been demoted. “He’s talented but a bit too outspoken. The crown prince wasn’t wrong to punish him, but forbidding him to treat patients

was indeed a waste of his talent. And the Department of Imperial Physicians now requires capable hands… So be it. Give out this command: Lin Rushan is to be reinstated as head imperial physician."

When Lin Qingyu was about to prostrate himself in gratitude on his father's behalf, the emperor grasped his hand. "At ease. You may proceed with your ministrations."

The emperor could not die before Xiao Cheng, so Lin Qingyu repressed his disgust and put on a show of demure subservience. Once the emperor's migraine had eased, the man opened a memorial and slowly began to peruse it.

"You're unwell, Your Majesty," Lin Qingyu said. "Worrying does you no good."

The emperor sighed. "Now that the crown prince has also fallen ill, who can worry in my stead?"

"The crown prince isn't your only son, Your Majesty."

The emperor narrowed his eyes dangerously. "What did you just say?"

Lin Qingyu fell to his knees, feigning panic. "Please punish this humble official for such an inappropriate remark, Your Majesty!"

Seeing Lin Qingyu's distressed expression, the emperor figured that he'd been too paranoid. What could a mere imperial physician possibly be up to?

"Rise," he said. "You're not wrong. Unfortunately, my other two sons…" His head throbbed when he thought about them. The text of the memorial even gradually blurred.

Noticing the emperor's pained look, Lin Qingyu said, "Your health should come first, Your Majesty. I suggest that you take a break."

"All right." The emperor nodded. "Sleep with me tonight, then."

Lin Qingyu stared at the man's throat. "Yes, Your Majesty."

He helped the emperor up. As they made their way to the bed, Lin Qingyu said abruptly, "I would like to seek forgiveness for something, Your Majesty."

"Oh? For what?"

"My mother felt unwell recently, so my godbrother Great General Gu and I prayed for her together at Changsheng Temple. We met Deputy Censor-in-Chief Yang Geng at the entrance," Lin Qingyu said. "Lord Yang said that male wives are bringers of misfortune, and that I shouldn't be overly close to other men, since I'm still in mourning. If I wound up bringing Great General Gu bad luck, even dying ten thousand times couldn't atone for my sins."

The emperor's heart stuttered in his chest. The devastation that had befallen the marquess of Nan'an's household was still vivid in his mind, and the marquess had only begun to recover from his illness once Lin Qingyu left his manor.

When it came to the bad luck Lin Qingyu allegedly caused, the emperor preferred to believe it was real over suffering the consequences of not believing it. Thus, he told Lin Qingyu, "You can take your leave. Have Xue Ying come attend to me."

When Lin Qingyu walked out of the emperor's bedchambers, Xue Ying rushed over.

"Why the rush, Eunuch Xue?"

“It’s the crown prince! He’s woken up from his coma!” Xue Ying announced joyously.

Lin Qingyu chuckled. “That…is indeed good news.”

Back at the Department of Imperial Physicians, Hu Ji told Lin Qingyu that although the crown prince had regained consciousness, his condition was debilitating. The degree to which he recovered would depend on the quality of his rehabilitative treatment.

Xiao Cheng’s temper had become even more volatile, Hu Ji added. Quick to anger, he had banished a concubine attending him to the Cold Palace—where Lady Lu had been sent—for no reason but her slight clumsiness.

Furthermore, Hu Ji had overheard a conversation between Lord Xie and the crown prince in the Eastern Palace. The crown prince, now seemingly uninterested in the nation’s affairs, had ordered that the party who’d attempted to assassinate him be seized and brought to the capital. Despite everything, he mentioned repeatedly that the culprit must be captured alive.

Lin Qingyu headed straight from the palace to Gu Fuzhou’s residence. When he got there, Yuan Yin led him onto the premises. “The great general is exercising in the training ground.”

Lin Qingyu went over to see a half-naked Gu Fuzhou lying down, propped up on his arms, his body in a straight line. He repeated a cycle of slowly lowering his body and pushing it back up again, muttering under his breath, “Seventy-seven, seventy-eight, seventy-nine…”

“Great General, Imperial Physician Lin is here,” Yuan Yin reported.

“Eighty!” Gu Fuzhou’s breath left his lips in a drawn-out exhalation. Standing up and haphazardly pulling on the garment presented to him, he joked, “Ah—Imperial Physician Lin saw me! I’m mortified!”

Lin Qingyu’s mood, which had soured after he heard that Xiao Cheng had revived, lifted somewhat. “I’ve helped you bathe. I’ve seen everything.”

Gu Fuzhou dismissed his servants, then said, “That was my previous body. You haven’t seen *this* body naked.”

“Am I not allowed to?”

“Didn’t you say that my abs had gone soft? You can look after I firm them up.” Gu Fuzhou lifted the hem of his top to wipe his sweat. “I’m so motherfuc—so damn beat. In the past, I could play basketball for ages, and I wouldn’t have been as drained as I am now. Time really is unforgiving…”

Lin Qingyu cut him off. “Xiao Cheng woke up from his coma.”

Gu Fuzhou raised a brow, unsurprised. “What’d I say? He has plot armor, so he won’t die that easily. But our mission wasn’t a complete failure—the emperor may not tolerate a weak, feeble crown prince who can’t be bothered with the nation’s affairs. Whatever happens will depend on whether Xiao Cheng does his job well.”

That would only become evident in the future, though.

Lin Qingyu pondered the matter, then instructed, “Arrange for us to remarry as soon as possible.”

That made Gu Fuzhou pause. The corners of his lips quirked up. “*Now* you’re rushing it, huh?”

Remembering the emperor’s actions toward him, Lin Qingyu replied, “We already made up our minds anyway. Dragging it out further will only

complicate things. Or did you change your mind and decide to marry the seventh princess instead?"

"Of course not," Gu Fuzhou said. "But are *you* really sure?"

"Do I not look like it?" Lin Qingyu asked instead of answering.

"I mean, have you thought about what'll happen after we marry? How are we going to…" Gu Fuzhou trailed off awkwardly. "Uh, how are we going to live as a married couple?"

Drawing a blank, Lin Qingyu replied hesitantly, "We'll be getting married again because we've been forced to, so our life as a married couple will be as it is now…presumably."

Gu Fuzhou pouted. "If that's what you think, I won't propose to you seriously."

Lin Qingyu didn't know what he meant by that. "Propose? Propose what? A plan?"

"Take this."

Gu Fuzhou flicked his fingers, and something golden arced through the air into Lin Qingyu's hands.

It was a ring made of pure gold and decorated with simple embossments, much thinner than the thumb rings men usually wore. Despite its dainty size, the ring was exquisite.

Lin Qingyu gave Gu Fuzhou a perplexed look. "What is this?"

"In my hometown, people wear a ring like this on their third finger when they are certain they'll marry each other," Gu Fuzhou explained. "It's a tradition."

"Is that so?" Lin Qingyu replied.

Gu Fuzhou talked about his hometown often. It sounded like an entirely different world, with bizarre things like “air conditioners” that had saved Gu Fuzhou’s life most days in summer. Long distances, comparable to that between Yongliang and the capital, could be traversed in three hours. Men came of age at eighteen years old and could lawfully marry at twenty-two. But if they went to Gu Fuzhou’s hometown now, their marital bond—one between two men—wouldn’t be acknowledged.

Ever since the pair first met, it had always been Gu Fuzhou who adapted to Great Yu’s customs. Lin Qingyu thought he should respect those of Gu Fuzhou’s hometown on occasion, so he made to slide the band onto his third finger, only for Gu Fuzhou to stop him loudly: “What are you doing?!”

“Didn’t you say that I should put it on?” Lin Qingyu asked, bewildered.

Gu Fuzhou couldn’t help laughing. “You can’t put it on yourself. I have to do it for you.”

“Is that another of your hometown’s customs?”

“Yeah.”

“How troublesome.” Lin Qingyu extended his left hand. “You do it, then.”

Gu Fuzhou’s expression suddenly turned solemn. He stared at Lin Qingyu’s fingers for a while, then wiped his hands with a cloth and plucked the band from Lin Qingyu’s palm carefully.

Lin Qingyu noticed Gu Fuzhou’s hands trembling slightly—he was nervous.

Yet Lin Qingyu had never seen Gu Fuzhou appear so dignified. It was as if he was completing the most important task of his life—and that made Lin Qingyu feel edgy too.

Gu Fuzhou must've held the band in his palm for a long time, for it was warm when he slowly slid it onto Lin Qingyu's third finger. There, the band shone dazzlingly under the sunlight. It felt strange.

Once Lin Qingyu was wearing the ring, neither of them spoke for a while.

Lin Qingyu composed himself. "Are you done?"

"Wait. I should say something melodramatic now. Let me think…" Gu Fuzhou took a deep breath, then grabbed Lin Qingyu's hand and placed it on his chest. "Now, Qingyu, I entrust the latter half of my life to you," he said passionately.

The latter half of his life? A life in which Lin Qingyu never married a woman or had children, spending every moment with Gu Fuzhou instead; in which they bantered, joked, and raged together, occasionally plotting and getting up to no good; in which they supported each other until the end of their lives?

That seemed…acceptable.

"Mm."

When Lin Qingyu gave him an inch, an excited Gu Fuzhou took another mile. “Promise me, then, that you won’t look at me with disdain even if I go bald, get fat, and lose my abs, okay?”

Lin Qingyu cooled in the blink of an eye, retracting his hand mercilessly. “Never.”

Chapter 63

AFTER LIN RUSHAN WAS REINSTATED, he became the physician tending to the emperor. Finally, Lin Qingyu no longer had to spend every day looking at a face that reminded him of Xiao Cheng. The medicinal skills of Lin Qingyu's father surpassed his own, and his miraculous work improved the emperor's condition day by day. Although he didn't fully recover, the frequency of his migraines decreased; so long as they didn't flare up again, he'd be no different from a healthy man.

On the other hand, although Xiao Cheng's injury seemed to be healing, the sword wound in his chest had sapped so much of his vitality that there was no way he could recover his health fully, even with treatment. He needed to take medicine every day, which made his already volatile temper even more violent and unpredictable, casting a fearful, anxious atmosphere over the Eastern Palace.

Despite how long they'd searched, the Tianji Guard still couldn't find any trace of Shen Huaishi's whereabouts, and Xiao Cheng couldn't focus on anything else. Knowing that his son had been through a frightful attack, the emperor tolerated his violent outbursts, but he also sent Xue Ying to discreetly remind the crown prince that he'd been going too far—although to no avail. How could someone as arrogant as Xiao Cheng stand to be dependent on medicine for the rest of his life? It enraged him even further that his childhood friend, Shen Huaishi, had reduced him to this state.

How many plans had Xiao Cheng made, and how many people had he killed, to reach the place where he was today? How could he stand that a

mere shadow guard had been his downfall? He swore never to rest until Shen Huaishi was taken into custody and under the crown prince's control.

In the emperor's bedchambers, Lin Rushan had just finished performing acupuncture on the emperor. Although the emperor felt relaxed, he was still dissatisfied. Lin Qingyu and Lin Rushan were father and son, but they didn't look much alike. Lin Rushan was only as handsome as the next man, but Lin Qingyu's beauty was otherworldly. If it weren't for the fact that male wives brought misfortune, the emperor would've been loath to let him go.

When Lin Rushan was leaving, the emperor asked casually, "What's Lin Qingyu doing lately?"

Lin Rushan's expression shifted slightly. "My son has been staying at the Department of Imperial Physicians, prescribing Your Majesty's medicine."

The emperor was skeptical, but he never lost sight of Lin Qingyu's inauspiciousness, so he only waved a hand. "Fine. You're dismissed."

Weighed down by his thoughts, Lin Rushan returned home, only to see a majestic Ferghana horse standing in front of the door. He knew this steed; it belonged to Gu Fuzhou, although it had grown much fatter. Lin Rushan hurriedly entered his home and asked the steward, "Has Great General Gu come to visit?"

The steward's expression seemed odd. "Y-yes, he's drinking tea with the lady and the eldest young master right now."

"Qingyu's back too?" Perfect. He wanted to tell his son to beware the emperor.

In his yard, however, Lin Rushan found that these two were not his only guests. There were quite a few unfamiliar faces in the courtyard—probably all subordinates and servants of the general. Yuan Yin from the general's residence was directing them to set several redwood trunks in place. There were red silk ribbons tied to the trunks, signifying that they held gifts from someone proposing marriage. The only thing was…the Lin family didn't have a daughter.

Full of doubts, Lin Rushan walked into the front hall and saw that his wife's expression was even more complex than his steward's. When Lady Lin saw him, her shoulders relaxed, as though she'd finally spotted someone she could rely on. "You're back."

Lin Rushan greeted Gu Fuzhou first; the general quickly helped him to his feet. "Great General," he said, "is this…?"

Gu Fuzhou smiled. "I'm here to propose, Godfather."

Lin Rushan exchanged a glance with his wife. "May I ask to whom?"

"To me," said Lin Qingyu.

What shocked the Lins more than Gu Fuzhou's proposal was their son's attitude. When the marquess of Nan'an's household had come to them with a proposal, Lin Qingyu had viewed being a male wife as shameful. He would rather have died than marry a man, although the emperor forced him to accept in the end. Why was he agreeing so calmly this time?

"The emperor seeks to arrange a marriage for me," Gu Fuzhou patiently explained. "But each of the girls he has singled out as a potential bride is either his own daughter or the daughter of one of those civil officials. I've thought about this over and over, and I cannot trust any maiden from

those families. I'm afraid they'd be a danger to me if I keep them close, so I want to personally choose my bride before an imperial edict does."

Lady Lin still didn't understand his insistence. "Great General, you're courageous, handsome, and a decorated hero. There must be many young women who truly admire you—you can choose the girl of your dreams from a military official's family. Why would you want to marry Qingyu of all people?"

Gu Fuzhou didn't have an answer and sent Lin Qingyu a pleading look. Lin Qingyu didn't want his parents to worry, so he hadn't told them about his predicament in the palace. Now he simply said, "The great general has always protected the Lin household. Marrying him would be more advantageous than not for me and our family."

Lady Lin didn't understand all this, but she remembered the shame her son had felt when he first became a male wife, and she didn't want that to happen again. She looked at her husband. "Sir…"

After a long silence, Lin Rushan said, "I understand." His son was doing this not only to help Great General Gu, but also to help himself. The emperor already coveted Lin Qingyu, and it was only a matter of time before an imperial edict forced him into the Inner Palace as a male concubine. If that day came, there would be truly nothing anyone could do.

Lin Qingyu had married a man before. If he'd wanted to marry a woman from a background comparable to his… Well, even if some girl did agree to it, he wouldn't want to ruin her reputation. Under these circumstances, it was best that he and Gu Fuzhou marry; at least they could take care of each other in the future.

“Since you both have your own motivations, we naturally won’t oppose you,” Lin Rushan said. “But the emperor might not be so quick to agree.”

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “Don’t worry, Father-in-Law. Leave that to me.”

He’d called Lin Rushan “Father-in-Law” so quickly and naturally that everyone but Lin Qingyu was shocked.

Seeing that the men were about to finalize their decision, Lady Lin couldn’t help saying, “But Young Marquess Lu hasn’t even been gone for a year.”

Her husband wasn’t as observant as she was, so perhaps he hadn’t noticed Lin Qingyu’s emotions after Lu Wancheng’s passing. Their son had appeared as calm and cool as ever, not shedding a single tear for the young marquess. He’d been like that since he was a child, not readily showing his emotions, so only his mother knew that Lu Wancheng’s death impacted Lin Qingyu more than anyone else.

“Are you worried about the rumors and malicious gossip that will surface, Mother-in-Law?” Gu Fuzhou asked.

She hesitated. “Not just that…”

Lin Qingyu knew what concerned his mother. “Don’t worry, Mother. I’ve long since forgotten Young Marquess Lu. Who was Lu Wancheng?” he scoffed. “Was he related to me somehow?”

His words rendered Gu Fuzhou speechless.

Since Lin Qingyu seemed indifferent to mourning Lu Wancheng, his mother couldn’t say anything about the planned marriage.

Gu Fuzhou had already given Lin Qingyu a ring and received his family's approval, so he didn't linger, leaving for the palace immediately. But Lin Qingyu, for his part, planned to eat dinner with his family before departing.

Lin Qinghe took the chance to sidle up to his brother. "Gege, are you really marrying Great General Gu?" The boy wasn't allowed to listen to adults' conversations, but he'd learned of this nevertheless from the female servants.

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Yes."

"But the great general is… He's too old." Lin Qinghe felt as though Lin Qingyu was being taken advantage of. "He's twelve years older than you!"

Lin Qingyu smiled. "He's not that old." In terms of their true ages, Gu Fuzhou was actually a year younger than him.

"Gege, can't you find another husband like Wancheng-gege?" Lin Qinghe begged.

To get Lin Qinghe to accept the marriage, albeit reluctantly, Lin Qingyu had to tell his younger brother that he might end up a concubine of a forty-year-old man unless he married the general.

Meanwhile, Gu Fuzhou had managed to meet with the emperor in Qinzheng Hall. The emperor's complexion had improved dramatically, and he would likely be able to attend court again soon.

"You came at just the right time," the emperor said. "Look at the emergency memorial Zhao Mingwei has sent from Yongliang."

Zhao Mingwei had written that Western Xia had rested its troops for several months and made a full comeback, returning with a vengeance and quickly taking over three of Great Yu's smaller cities. After those defeats, Great Yu's army had grown doubtful of their own abilities, and they desperately needed Great General Gu back in Yongliang to lead them forward.

Gu Fuzhou's face didn't show any emotion, but inside, he panicked. As if he could do anything to help the situation! He knew exactly how little he was capable of. His previous consecutive wins had been nothing but luck; after those, he was bound to rack up defeats. If he just quit now, he could keep his honor. Zhao Mingwei might win six out of every ten battles he fought, but he'd fought hundreds of them. That was a much better success rate than Gu Fuzhou's measly five consecutive wins.

"I've already said that I want you to leave the capital with a wife," the emperor continued. "Before, we had to delay your marriage plans due to the crown prince's sudden ailment, but now we can postpone them no longer. You must first settle down before charging into battle at Yongliang, so that you can do so fearlessly. The empress picked out several noblewomen for you—do you have one in mind?"

Gu Fuzhou folded the memorial. "Now that you mention marriage, I asked Imperial Preceptor Xu to specially divine my romantic prospects."

"Oh?" The emperor had always respected that mysterious imperial preceptor. "What did he say?"

"He said that I must take a male wife—specifically one born in the chen hour on the eleventh day of the third month of the guiwei year. Only then will the gods aid me on the battlefield."

“A male wife?” The emperor frowned. “Did the imperial preceptor really say that?”

“Yes. Your Majesty already made an exception allowing the late Young Marquess Lu to take a male wife, and I hope that I may be allowed too.”

“Do you know that a male wife is said to bring bad luck?”

“The imperial preceptor says that the luck depends on the person. A male wife might be inauspicious to someone else, but he would bring me boundless fortune.”

Since he’d already set a precedent, the emperor couldn’t really refuse. “Have you found a man with that particular bazi?”

“My younger godbrother, Imperial Physician Lin Qingyu, happens to fit the exact criteria.”

The emperor abruptly rose. “Lin Qingyu? Did you say Lin Qingyu?”

He shot to his feet, wobbling after standing up too quickly; he hadn’t fully recovered. Xue Ying quickly steadied him. “Your Majesty, take care.”

The emperor realized that he’d lost his composure. “Lin Qingyu is an important member of the Department of Imperial Physicians. He cannot leave my side, and he certainly isn’t someone you can even think of marrying.”

“Marrying me won’t interfere with his job,” Gu Fuzhou replied. “Imperial Physician Lin is already an official, so things will continue in the future as they have in the past. And I won’t need him to manage the residence as my main wife.”

“Preposterous!” the emperor insisted, slamming his hand down on the table. “How can I, the emperor, allow a male wife to be a fifth-rank official and work in the palace with the other officials?!”

Gu Fuzhou's tone cooled significantly. "Imperial Physician Lin has already been a male wife, and Your Majesty gave him an official position regardless—isn't that true? Imperial Physician Lin found the cure for the epidemic and relieved your migraines. It's because I am taking Your Majesty's health into consideration that I'm willing to allow my wife to continue working in the palace."

"I have yet to agree to this," the emperor said coldly, "and you're already calling him your wife?"

The corners of Gu Fuzhou's lips turned up slightly. "Just as you said, Your Majesty, I must settle down so I can charge into battle at Yongliang fearlessly." He kneeled and bowed his head. "Your Majesty, please allow this marriage."

The emperor had picked up on the threat in Gu Fuzhou's words. As rage overwhelmed him, so did a terrible headache. He clutched his head, unable to focus on anything else. "Get me Lin Rushan!"

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News of Lin Qingyu's imminent second marriage to Gu Fuzhou spread quickly. A year after his first marriage, the Lin family had again become the topic of gossip among the nobility of the capital. Or, rather, rumors had never stopped from the moment Lin Qingyu married Lu Wancheng.

All kinds of speculation about Lin Qingyu spread through the Department of Imperial Physicians. Several times, Hu Ji had wanted to ask Lin Qingyu what exactly was going on. When he saw Lin Qingyu acting as

though nothing had happened, however, he found himself unable to open his mouth.

Lin Qingyu hated gossips. If someone wanted to be friends with him, they had to know what could be mentioned, and what should never be.

When Hu Ji returned from work elsewhere that day, he ran into a few imperial censors walking together, discussing Lin Qingyu's remarriage.

"Although male wives aren't unheard of, the previous marriage didn't end well, did it? Why would Great General Gu go out of his way to marry a male widow? I just don't get it."

"I heard that he went to the imperial preceptor, who told him that Lin Qingyu would bring him luck."

"Ridiculous! Gu Fuzhou must've been seduced by Lin Qingyu's beauty and bribed the imperial preceptor to say that. If he's so willing to indulge in a man's beauty, then if the enemies send him a beautiful woman, won't he fall for the trick immediately?"

"I think that Lin Qingyu seduced him. He didn't remain a widow for his late husband's sake. Instead, he kept showing his face in the palace as an imperial physician. I wouldn't be surprised by anything he does. It's just a shame that he's ruined Great General Gu's heroic reputation…"

Hu Ji couldn't stand these awful words, but as a lowly physician, he wasn't in the position to stop the censors' discussion. He was about to go around them when someone behind him said, "If I may—"

Hu Ji and the other officials looked back, only to see Gu Fuzhou standing behind them in his first-rank military official uniform embroidered

with a pair of flying eagles. His expression was cold and serious as he towered above the censors like a crane among a group of chickens.

"Enough is enough," he said slowly. "Whose fiancé do you think you're talking about?"

Gu Fuzhou's voice was oddly calm, but his vaguely oppressive and destructive tone struck fear into everyone's hearts.

The censors exchanged glances as they acknowledged him. "These lowly officials greet you, Great General."

Yang Geng, who was among the censors, gathered his courage. "We're censors personally appointed by the emperor," he informed Gu Fuzhou. "Imperial censors are responsible for upholding discipline and monitoring conduct around the palace, and we're allowed to report any breach of conduct to the emperor. Imperial Physician Lin's actions have been improper, even shameful. Why should we not speak of that?!"

Gu Fuzhou's gaze swept over each of them. "Listen, all of you. I was the one who begged the emperor for Imperial Physician Lin. Imperial Physician Lin himself was unwilling to give in, but he was forced to due to the power I hold. If you'd like to reproach me for anything else, say it."

"Great General Gu, you're forcing us into a corner. Do you wish to raise your weapon against us?!" Yang Geng roared.

"Can I not?"

As soon as Gu Fuzhou said this, rage erupted in the group of censors. "Of course not! This is the imperial palace, not a northwestern battlefield or the combat grounds of a general's encampment!"

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “Oh—you must think that I’ve never fought any battles elsewhere.”

Yang Geng’s face and neck flushed bright red in anger. “Great General Gu, I only have one question: Do you or do you not respect the emperor?!”

Seeing their altercation escalating, Hu Ji feared that Lin Qingyu would get dragged into all this. He hurried over. “Great General!”

Naturally, Gu Fuzhou remembered this imperial physician with intimate ties to the Lin family. “What?”

“Please calm down, Great General. This is the palace, after all. If the emperor hears about this and blames Imperial Physician Lin, then…”

Gu Fuzhou lost interest. “Scram,” he told the officials.

The general had been headed toward Qinzheng Hall to discuss the war in the northwest with other officials, so he didn’t stay for long.

When Hu Ji returned to the Department of Imperial Physicians, he saw Lin Qingyu reading pulse records and couldn’t resist approaching him.

“Great General Gu…” Hu Ji shuddered. “He’s a bit scary.”

Lin Qingyu was a bit surprised. “Why would you think that?”

Hu Ji told him what had just happened. “It’s no wonder he’s scary, though,” he remarked. “How many souls have perished under the general’s Qingyun Jiuzhou spear? Only the war god of the northwest could emanate an aura that weighed so heavily on those imperial censors that they struggled to breathe. I always thought that Great General Gu was a reserved, composed warrior, yet he said that he’d been in fights outside the battlefield…”

When Lin Qingyu heard that, he couldn’t help but smile. His past and future husband seemed to have a side that Lin Qingyu didn’t know about.

A gust of wind blew in through the open window, bringing a hint of frost. “The days are turning colder, aren’t they?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“Yes,” Hu Ji said. “It’s almost winter.”

“Time passes so quickly,” Lin Qingyu sighed, feeling wistful out of nowhere.

Once again, a winter’s story was about to unfold.

Chapter 64

IN THE END, the emperor unwillingly granted Gu Fuzhou and Lin Qingyu's marriage. Conflicts were rising in the northwest again, so right now, he had to make sure Gu Fuzhou was happy. Besides, Xu Junyuan had said that the marriage would be auspicious. The emperor had to release his personal desires for the sake of the bigger picture. He was the ruler of an empire; he knew that he should prioritize his land and subjects above a beautiful imperial physician.

That said, the emperor had only tacitly agreed to this marriage, not formally instructed them to wed. He'd also issued an imperial edict: From now on, male wives could no longer become court officials.

When Gu Fuzhou heard that, he wanted to argue that point with the emperor as well, but Lin Qingyu stopped him. "Don't worry. It won't be long before the emperor personally invites me back."

Gu Fuzhou pretended to complain. "Physician Lin's been doing bad things without me again."

"This didn't really count as a bad thing."

The day Lin Qingyu left the palace, most of his colleagues from the Department of Imperial Physicians simply stood by and watched. But Hu Ji walked with him the entire way—and, to Lin Qingyu's surprise, Chu Zhengde also came to see him off.

The old man still didn't look thrilled to see Lin Qingyu, and his tone was quite sarcastic as well when he said, "You're really marrying whoever you want. You're wasting all your talent and potential!"

Lin Qingyu was indifferent to the criticism. “It’s precisely because I have talent that I can take breaks on occasion.”

That stunned Chu Zhengde into silence for a moment. Then he said angrily, “Get out, get out. I feel unlucky just looking at you.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t get to leave, though—an Eastern Palace eunuch arrived and announced that the crown prince wanted to see him.

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When Lin Qingyu saw Xiao Cheng again for the first time in ages, he barely held back a laugh.

After struggling at death’s door, Xiao Cheng seemed like a completely different person from the energetic, spirited man he used to be. He’d grown much thinner, his cheeks were sunken, and his lips were pale. Even the magnificent clothes he wore did little to hide his pitiable condition. It even occurred to Lin Qingyu that the crown prince looked no better than Shen Huaishi when Lin Qingyu met him that day at Changsheng Temple.

When the crown prince’s eyes looked toward Lin Qingyu, they were no longer full of arrogance and rational calculation. Instead, his vengeful eyes contained hatred.

Following the rules, Lin Qingyu told Xiao Cheng politely: “This lowly official greets Your Highness.”

Xiao Cheng no longer held Lin Qingyu’s gaze as he had before. Instead, he asked immediately, “Have you got news of Shen Huaishi?”

Lin Qingyu raised his eyebrows. “Guard Shen is Your Highness’s personal bodyguard, yet you ask me for news of him?”

Xiao Cheng pursed his lips tightly. Even after so long, the Tianji Guard had found no trace of Shen Huaishi. Anxiety and anger still blazed within the crown prince, even after he’d smashed everything he got his hands on in the Eastern Palace. In the end, one of the Tianji Guards asked timidly, “Does Guard Shen have any relatives or friends, Your Highness? We could start with them.”

Xiao Cheng had frozen. He’d thought for a long time before finally remembering Lin Qingyu.

All Shen Huaishi’s relatives and friends had disappeared three years earlier along with the Tianyu Sect. During those three years, setting aside Xiao Cheng himself, Shen Huaishi had seemingly interacted only with Lin Qingyu. Had that not been the case, Shen Huaishi wouldn’t have appeared on Jingchun’s birthday to plead for mercy on Lin Qingyu’s behalf.

“You only need to answer my questions,” Xiao Cheng said. “Have I allowed you to ask anything else?”

“I last saw Guard Shen at the Imperial Academy of Medicine,” Lin Qingyu said. “I don’t know what mission he had carried out on your orders, Your Highness, but he was covered in wounds. I just gave him a treatment for them. That’s all.”

“Did he say anything to you?” Xiao Cheng held little hope that Lin Qingyu would know anything, but…he really was completely out of ideas. He needed to grasp any tiny morsel of information, even if it was completely trivial.

Lin Qingyu thought for a while. “He mentioned Princess Jingchun.”

“Jingchun?” Xiao Cheng asked impatiently. “What did he say?”

“He said that he’d grown up with Princess Jingchun and had seen her be forced to marry the North King. He didn’t know how she had fared over the last three years.”

“Did he say he was *going* to the North Kingdom?” Xiao Cheng pressed.

If Lin Qingyu appeared to guide the conversation too deliberately, that would only increase Xiao Cheng’s suspicions, so he merely replied, “He never said that. He only said that he was Your Highness’s shadow guard, so he naturally had to be by your side.”

Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes. “I have no further need of you for the moment.”

Before leaving, Lin Qingyu asked, “Your Highness, are you aware of my engagement to Great General Gu?”

“Of course,” Xiao Cheng said mockingly. “You’re eager to remarry even before Lu Wancheng’s corpse has gone cold. As I thought, Lin Qingyu, you truly cannot live without a man. But how could an oaf like Gu Fuzhou satisfy you in bed? A sickly invalid like Lu Wancheng couldn’t have done so either. If you had been with me earlier, perhaps you would have tasted heavenly pleasure.”

Lin Qingyu could tell that Xiao Cheng was just talking big. In his current condition, the crown prince probably couldn’t have gotten it up even if Princess Jingchun stood in front of him.

“At one time, Your Highness repeatedly made advances toward me, so I thought that you summoned me today over my marriage to Great General Gu. I didn’t expect that you’d leave it completely unmentioned, instead focusing only on Guard Shen.” Lin Qingyu laughed quietly. “It seems as though Your Highness cares much more about Guard Shen than me.”

Xiao Cheng froze, as if he’d only just realized that as well. Then, as if trying to convince himself, he replied, “I’m concerned about his whereabouts because I want to punish him and see that he reaps what he has sowed.”

“As you say, Your Highness. This lowly official shall now depart.”

However rumors flew, Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou’s marriage would still happen. They didn’t have much time to plan, but under Lady Lin and Yuan Yin, everything from the formal proposal to selecting an auspicious wedding date went smoothly.

The last time Lin Qingyu got married, he’d prepared basically no dowry. When Lady Lin wrote a list for him this time, though, he said, “We can include more.”

His mother looked embarrassed. “Qingyu, your father has always been humble and righteous through his years working in the palace, refusing bribes from others. We only have this much saved up.”

Lin Qingyu smiled. “That’s not what I meant, Mother. I’m the one being taken as a bride, so of course I’ll provide my own dowry. How could I use my parents’ savings? Don’t worry—I’ll delegate this to the servants.”

“How will you provide your own dowry?” Lady Lin fretted. “You’ve worked in the palace for such a short time.”

“Young Marquess Lu can help me with that.” Lu Wancheng had left him a large inheritance, and he had nowhere else to spend it.

Lady Lin was shocked. “Th-that wouldn’t be right, would it?”

“What’s not right about it?” Lin Qingyu smiled a little. “If Young Marquess Lu hears about this in the underworld, he might want me to take a *bigger* dowry to the general’s residence.”

Lady Lin’s eldest son was growing more and more mysterious. However, Lady Lin never questioned Lin Qingyu’s decisions; in the end, everything proceeded according to his wishes.

The soon-to-be husband and wife couldn’t see each other in private before the wedding. But despite that, Gu Fuzhou kept delivering gifts to the Lin residence. For instance, the robes that Lin Qingyu would wear on the wedding day were brought over by Yuan Yin after being personally chosen by Gu Fuzhou.

Lin Qingyu knew that Gu Fuzhou was oddly obsessed with seeing his fiancé in wedding robes. He had thought that Gu Fuzhou would pick a set even more elaborate than those Lin Qingyu had first gotten married in, but what he received was robes of extremely fine silk without excessive embroidery. They were simply an expanse of crimson, like a pure, burning flame.

Lin Qingyu touched the band on his ring finger, which was also carved simply. Gu Fuzhou truly had fine taste; the general didn’t like wearing garish clothes either.

With the robes arrived a letter from Gu Fuzhou. It was written in informal language and was full of complaints about how tired and hungry he’d been these past couple of days, and how he couldn’t take it anymore. He

then made declarations about his life, saying that living was boring, that he'd rather jump in a lake than not eat meat, and so on.

Lin Qingyu didn't understand. "I expected the general to be tired, but why is he hungry?"

"In order to encourage himself to train, the great general ordered his wedding robes to be made a size smaller," Yuan Yin said in resignation. "He doesn't eat much these days, sustaining himself only on leafy greens and radishes. Yesterday, he even asked me, 'Why must men live? Only to wed beautiful wives? Life truly isn't worth it…'"

Lin Qingyu didn't know what to say. Gu Fuzhou's figure actually wasn't half bad. He had broad shoulders and long legs, so he would never look beefy. Everything about his frame was fine as it was. Lin Qingyu had said that Gu Fuzhou's abs were getting flabby specifically to encourage him to exercise more; there was no harm in that, after all. He just hadn't realized that it would be such a blow to Gu Fuzhou.

Lin Qingyu laughed. "Tell him that I don't like men who are too thin. He should eat properly."

Chapter 65

As he waited to get married, Lin Qingyu spent the days at home, going nowhere else. Everything related to the wedding was seen to by servants and other parties, so Lin Qingyu only had to read and keep his little brother company.

In the blink of an eye, the night before the wedding arrived. Lin Qingyu hadn't slept for even four hours when matrons of honor came from the general's residence. When he married Lu Wancheng, Lin Qingyu remembered, the marquess's residence had also sent matrons. Lin Qingyu didn't know whether it had stemmed from his emotional state, but when he'd seen those two matrons last time, he'd loathed them. He was well aware that they were only following orders, but he'd still resented them. He'd never taken revenge on them, though.

This time, the two matrons were graceful young women who helped Lin Qingyu freshen up and change.

"I remember that I have to take a bath before doing my hair, right?" Lin Qingyu asked. After bathing, male and female brides alike needed to apply ointment to a certain part of their body to make the subsequent activities easier for their husband.

The matrons smiled. "That's the usual procedure, but Great General Gu said to do whatever you're comfortable with, Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu laughed. "He's considerate."

Lin Qingyu did take a bath. He wanted to wash away the misfortune he'd brought out of the palace with him, if nothing else. Afterward, the

matrons dried and combed his long hair.

"Do you want to wear the wedding headdress, Physician Lin?"

"Is that decision also mine to make?"

"Yes. According to the great general, it would be fine with him even if Physician Lin wanted to marry him in everyday clothes."

How could that be fine with him? If Lin Qingyu didn't wear wedding robes, that young man would most likely be smiling happily on the surface, but who knew how long he'd complain in private?

"Do my makeup however you usually do makeup on men."

The matron studied Lin Qingyu's face carefully. "How do I even start? Whatever I apply to Physician Lin's face will seem unnecessary."

"Such sweet words. You want a tip, hm?" Lin Qingyu said indifferently.

The matron giggled behind her hand. "A tip? How would I dare? I was simply telling the truth." She opened her makeup box and took out a sheet of rouge paper. "Please place this between your lips, Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu hesitated, then pressed his pale lips to the paper, which stained them bright red immediately.

The matron drew on his brows lightly, then placed a huadian on his forehead. After all that, she said in satisfaction, "Your skin is perfect, Physician Lin—so fair and flawless. It doesn't even need any powder."

Even if his skin weren't perfect, Lin Qingyu wouldn't have put up with powder. Gu Fuzhou could deal with his skin. Eyebrows, rouge, and a huadian were his limit.

The matrons had finished his makeup quite quickly; his hair didn't dry for another hour. At that point, the women helped him put on a wedding headdress specifically fashioned for a male bride, and two servants spread out the wedding robes, each holding one side. "Please change into your robes, Physician Lin."

The servants wanted to help him up, but Lin Qingyu said, "I can do it myself."

Then he put his arms through the sleeves, and the servants draped the robes over his body. As the matrons tied the belt around his waist, one of them couldn't help exclaiming, "Physician Lin's waist is as thin as a girl's."

"Not necessarily," the other one teased. "Not every girl's waist is this thin and delicate!"

Afterward, the matrons placed the wedding veil over Lin Qingyu's head, covering his vision with a field of red.

This scene was familiar; it had once been his most shameful memory. Back then, he might never have imagined that, one day, he would willingly become a male wife again. Even if he and Gu Fuzhou were just doing this to avoid trouble, it was still a bit unbelievable.

A thought flashed through Lin Qingyu's mind—had there really been no way to solve the difficulty at hand but to marry Gu Fuzhou?

There might've been a different solution, yet he'd chosen to marry Gu Fuzhou once again.

After all these preparations, the sky was already bright. At the chosen auspicious time, Lin Qingyu went to the Lin residence's main hall to bid farewell to his parents. They had already been through this process once, and

as complicated as their feelings were, they took it much better than last time. They gave him some reminders, and then the wedding procession arrived.

The procession, which was headed by General Wu Zhan, consisted mostly of military officials who were close to Gu Fuzhou. Warriors generally welcomed their wives with a loud, rowdy procession, but today, these rough-mannered soldiers looked more refined than ever before. Having been cautioned directly by the great general, they didn't dare cause any chaos in front of this great beauty; they were perfectly behaved as they ushered Lin Qingyu into the bridal litter.

Eight people carried this bridal sedan; in Great Yu, that was an honor only a first wife could enjoy.

The eldest Lin son's second marriage attracted plenty of civilian onlookers. The heroic Great General Gu—whom everyone knew stories about—would, in his thirties, be marrying for the first time, and to a recently widowed male wife. Truly, if one lived long enough, one could come across anything.

"Ever since the emperor granted a marriage to two men last year, people have gone crazy imitating them. My second uncle's youngest son also took a male wife recently—how terribly public morals have declined!"

"Say, why would those guys marry a man instead of a good, proper woman? Men can't even bear children!"

"Hey, he's so pretty, I'd marry him too…"

"Beautiful people are bad luck. And if his first marriage was unlucky for his first husband's family, then his second marriage could be unlucky for the general. And wouldn't his third marriage be unlucky for the empire?"

“Shh! Are you even listening to yourself? Do you value your life or not?!”

The attendants lifted and carried the bridal litter step by step toward the general’s residence, leaving the rumors and gossip far behind. A swarm of people and an endless line of carriages laden with dowry items followed behind. The wedding procession moved around half of the capital before stopping in front of the general’s residence.

“Place the litter!” the officiant yelled.

The curtain was lifted, and Lin Qingyu was helped toward the general’s residence. As soon as he went in the door, a hand appeared below his veil.

This hand was large and warm, the fingers thick and rough with calluses; it was obviously the hand of a warrior. When he placed his own hand upon it, Lin Qingyu heard a familiar, excited voice whisper, “Our Physician Lin really wore wedding robes!”

Who else would whisper to him during such a solemn occasion?

Although Lin Qingyu knew that it was against the rules, he still replied, “You don’t need the rooster to take your place this time?”

The matrons noticed the whispering and gave Gu Fuzhou a reminder: “General, you can’t talk to the lady right now.”

Surprisingly, Gu Fuzhou shut his mouth, obedient. Lin Qingyu held the silk ball[13] as they walked together into the main hall, while Gu Fuzhou held the other end of the ribbon.

Gu Fuzhou had no parents or relatives. The person sitting in the seat of honor was healthy old Duke Wu. He accepted the newlyweds’ prostrations

with a smile so wide it was clear he could barely contain himself, praising them continually.

After the prostrations, Lin Qingyu was sent to the bridal chamber, while Gu Fuzhou had to stay in the main hall to entertain the guests. As soon as the beauty left, the military officials relaxed their strict demeanors and crowded around Gu Fuzhou.

The reception lasted from dawn to dusk. Gu Fuzhou didn't want to be there, but the generals were truly persistent. He'd never been inundated with alcohol before, but today, he was drinking with General Wu Zhan, whose tolerance for liquor seemed to have no limit. Gu Fuzhou wound up plastered. In the end, Duke Wu had to save him from the fray, saying that Gu Fuzhou shouldn't get *too* drunk, or his first time wouldn't be good. That made the other men laugh uproariously.

Gu Fuzhou doubted he would even be having a "first time." Still, he could use his drunkenness as an excuse to cross a few lines by touching that long, silky hair or making the great beauty call him "laogong."

Gu Fuzhou practically floated back to the bridal chamber. The closer he got, the floatier he felt. By the end of his journey, he even thought that he could be flying, as if he were dreaming. He had married Lin Qingyu again. He'd personally prostrated himself beside Lin Qingyu, and he would lift his veil and drink nuptial wine with him.

Such beautiful traditions. He loved this culture so much.

Gu Fuzhou took a deep breath. His hand rested on the door—which was decorated with the character for "joy"—for a long time. Then he gently pushed it open.

When Lin Qingyu heard the noise, he lifted his head from his book. “You’re back.”

Gu Fuzhou wore robes as red as Lin Qingyu’s. He looked handsome and sharp, his eyes as bright as stars. Whichever way he turned, he was obviously a mature man. Only those eyes revealed a hint of youthfulness that no one could sense otherwise.

The pair locked eyes. Gu Fuzhou opened his mouth but didn’t say anything before he backed out and closed the door again.

Lin Qingyu sat alone in the room, perplexed. Before he knew what was happening, the door opened again, and Gu Fuzhou confirmed that his eyes were working. “Where’s the red veil?” he cried. “Where the hell did that veil go?”

“The wedding veil?” Lin Qingyu looked at the table. “I put it there.”

Gu Fuzhou gaped, staring at Lin Qingyu. “That wasn’t a decent thing to do,” he complained. “Shouldn’t *I* take off your wedding veil?”

“It was constantly getting in my way.” While the bridegroom had been out partying and drinking, the bride could only sit in the bedroom and wait for most of the day. This wasn’t their first time getting married, and he and Gu Fuzhou were already so familiar with each other that Lin Qingyu hadn’t thought that they needed to follow every rule. After all, he could use the half day to read an entire book.

A dark cloud of resentment enveloped Gu Fuzhou. “Say that doing that was wrong. Quick, say it was wrong, and I won’t be mad.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t think he had done anything wrong, but when he saw Gu Fuzhou’s stricken face, he added, “I didn’t wash my face or undress,

though.”

He felt slightly peeved. He’d worn wedding robes on his body, a huadian between his brows, and even a bit of rouge on his lips. He wasn’t used to wearing that makeup, but he hadn’t yet washed it off. Nevertheless, Gu Fuzhou was still chastising him.

Gu Fuzhou abruptly came to his senses and looked at Lin Qingyu dazedly. He gazed at the huadian between his brows, at his eyes rippling with emotion, at his crimson lips, at the corset cinching his waist. He looked at the beauty who could ruin an empire—in wedding robes that Gu Fuzhou had personally chosen—watching him quietly, a hint of a complaint in his eyes, as if he were saying, *“Why did you only just get here?”*

Behind Lin Qingyu, hazy candlelight danced, illuminating the character for “joy.” In his red robes, the imperial physician looked as soft and beautiful as a peach blossom, yet he shone brighter than any star in the sky.

“Ah.” Gu Fuzhou blinked. “I think you’ve cheered me up.”

Lin Qingyu raised his eyebrows. “So quickly?”

“I’m easy to placate.” Gu Fuzhou stumbled toward him. “Not like Physician Lin, who’s super hard to please, and makes me try for so long…”

The scent of alcohol assaulted Lin Qingyu’s nose as he caught Gu Fuzhou. “Just how much did you drink?”

Gu Fuzhou buried his head in Lin Qingyu’s neck. “I didn’t want to drink all that, but they kept pouring it down my throat…”

Gu Fuzhou was too heavy for Lin Qingyu to hold him up alone, and the two fell together onto the bridal bed. As soon as Gu Fuzhou toppled over, he refused to move again, as if glued to the bed.

“Who forced you to drink?” Lin Qingyu asked. “Next time, remember to pour booze down *their* throats in return.”

Gu Fuzhou started counting the perpetrators on his fingers.

“Keep counting,” Lin Qingyu said. “I’ll have someone brew hangover soup.”

When he turned, the drunk Gu Fuzhou suddenly reached out and grabbed his waist from behind, dragging him backward. Lin Qingyu fell onto the bed, landing in Gu Fuzhou’s arms.

“Qingyu.”

“Hm?”

“Laopo…”[14]

Why was Gu Fuzhou still calling him an old woman on their wedding night…*second* wedding night?

Lin Qingyu retaliated by calling Gu Fuzhou an old man: “Don’t call me that, laogong.”

Gu Fuzhou kept looking at Lin Qingyu as he laughed, eyes curved and bright as stars. When he’d finally laughed his fill, he gestured for Lin Qingyu to come closer.

When Lin Qingyu leaned over him, Gu Fuzhou put his hand by his lips as if telling him a secret. “I’m not straight anymore…”

“Where aren’t you straight?” Lin Qingyu asked in confusion.

Gu Fuzhou looked shocked, then lay back on the red bedsheets, covering his eyes with his arm. “It’s fine if you, the culprit, don’t want to take responsibility,” he said sadly. “But you’re supposed to be my dearest friend.

Still, I can’t flip a straight man without his consent…I’m so annoyed I might die.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t understand. “What in the world does that mean?”

Gu Fuzhou closed his eyes. “It means I have a crush on you. I want us to date,” he said quietly.

Lin Qingyu furrowed his brow. “You want to crush me on a certain date…?”

Gu Fuzhou didn’t say anything.

“We haven’t drunk nuptial wine yet,” Lin Qingyu reminded him. “Are you sure you want to go to sleep?”

The only response was Gu Fuzhou’s steady breathing. It seemed he really had drifted off.

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Chapter 66

IN THE MORNING, Lin Qingyu felt someone beside him move. He'd always been a light sleeper, and it was close to the time when he usually got up, so he soon opened his eyes.

He had slept on the side of the bed further into the room, so the first thing he saw was the stubs of red candles and morning light filtering through the windows. He turned to the other side. The other man…youth, rather… faced him, sound asleep. Half his face and one hand peeked outside the blanket, and the other hand rested on Lin Qingyu's waist.

When Gu Fuzhou had passed out from the liquor he'd drunk the previous night, Lin Qingyu had undressed him and—with difficulty—stuffed him beneath the blankets. He'd originally wanted to make do with sleeping in the study, but this was their wedding night. On their first wedding night, they'd slept in the same room, even though they hadn't known each other. If they slept in different rooms now, wouldn't it feel as though the past two years had amounted to nothing?

There was no divan in the room, only the bed. Lin Qingyu thought for a long time, then shoved Gu Fuzhou further under the covers and lay back down on the bed's outer edge.

He hadn't thought that he'd sleep well; he hadn't expected the sleeping Gu Fuzhou to be so considerate, barely even tossing or turning. It seemed believable that Gu Fuzhou could sleep as though nothing was wrong even while Yongliang was being attacked, then need to evacuate with a blanket draped around his shoulders.

The young man's true age was nineteen, yet he slept a lot—like a child. Lin Qingyu couldn't resist reaching out and touching the defined bridge of Gu Fuzhou's nose. Then he decided to get up.

But he couldn't. Gu Fuzhou…was sleeping on top of his hair.

The lower half of Lin Qingyu's long tresses was completely trapped beneath Gu Fuzhou. If Lin Qingyu moved even slightly, it hurt his scalp. He tried to push Gu Fuzhou away, but even after much effort, the man didn't move an inch. Then he tried to grab and extract his hair, but he only succeeded in paining himself so badly that he wanted to poison someone.

Lin Qingyu could no longer take this. Calling Gu Fuzhou's name wouldn't wake the general up, so Lin Qingyu pinched the man's nose closed. Despite being deeply asleep, Gu Fuzhou furrowed his brow at the lack of air, then opened his eyes. When he saw Lin Qingyu, he opened his mouth too.

"Awake now?" Lin Qingyu asked coldly.

Having been awoken by such a cruel tactic, Gu Fuzhou was bewildered, sleep still hazing his eyes. He stared unblinkingly at the beautiful face in front of him. The fog lifted, and his eyes slowly cleared.

"Why are you…" Gu Fuzhou's voice sounded low and hoarse. He realized where his hand was resting, and his eyes widened abruptly, fingers curling as if he didn't know where to put them. "Why are you on my bed?"

"Why do you think?" Lin Qingyu asked coldly.

"Did I force you here?" Gu Fuzhou was flabbergasted by the thought. "Finally grow some balls?"

Lin Qingyu scoffed. "You?" He punched Gu Fuzhou's arm hard. "Move. You're lying on my hair." Gu Fuzhou scooted away. That finally

freed Lin Qingyu, who sat up and told him, “Since you’re awake now, you might as well get up.”

Gu Fuzhou recalled the previous night’s events. He remembered only pushing open the door, expectant; once he saw the beautiful man inside without a veil, his blood pressure had immediately risen, and he’d blacked out. Realistically, he had probably just fallen asleep.

But if Lin Qingyu hadn’t been forced onto the bed, then had he willingly slept there? Were things going that well? *Goddamn it—how could I fall asleep last night?! At my age, with a beauty lying next to me? How could I have fallen asleep?*

Lin Qingyu gazed at the frozen Gu Fuzhou. “You’re not getting up?”

Recovering from his shock, Gu Fuzhou replied slowly, “Why are you getting up so early? You don’t need to serve tea to your in-laws.”

“We should eat breakfast.”

“We can sleep a bit more. Then, when the time comes, we’ll just eat lunch.” Still lying in bed, Gu Fuzhou laughed. “This is our first time sleeping together, Qingyu. Let’s sleep some more.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t make a habit of sleeping in, but after meeting Gu Fuzhou’s expectant gaze, he lay back down. He pulled his long hair to one side to ensure that Gu Fuzhou wouldn’t end up lying on it, and then the two lay facing each other, chatting casually.

“Were any civil officials among the guests yesterday?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“Some,” Gu Fuzhou replied absently. “Not every civil official is an idiot. Xiao Jie came too, with lots of gifts. You could make a living off of

marrying me, Qingyu. If you do it a few more times, you'll eventually become the richest person in the capital."

Lin Qingyu didn't bother replying to Gu Fuzhou's nonsense; instead, he asked about something important. "How is your relationship with Xiao Jie going now?"

"He admires me a lot. He wants to come here to touch the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear himself."

At that point, Lin Qingyu finally remembered that *he* still hadn't seen that legendary spear—even though Gu Fuzhou had been back for a while. "Do you keep the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear in the training ground?"

Gu Fuzhou laughed. "It was a gift from the royal court. I have to keep it in my room to show how important it is, of course."

"Your room?" Lin Qingyu looked around. "Where?"

Gu Fuzhou pointed lazily toward the corner. "There."

A long metal rod stood propped against the wall; there was a red ribbon tied to its tip.

"It's convenient for hanging clothes on," Gu Fuzhou added.

That rendered Lin Qingyu speechless.

After lying down for a long time, Lin Qingyu wanted to change his position. When he raised one hand, he accidentally touched something and froze. His hand quickly retracted. This young man had looked so calm as he chatted and joked in bed with Lin Qingyu… Had he been so aroused all along?

Gu Fuzhou was also startled, and the atmosphere turned a bit weird.

After a brief silence, Gu Fuzhou spoke. “What kind of reaction was that? Do you think your hand will break out in boils if you touch it?”

For some reason, envisioning that made Lin Qingyu want to laugh. “No. I don’t think so.”

“You weren’t like that before, though. Before, you were like—” Gu Fuzhou began to imitate Lin Qingyu’s tone. They were so close that he could sound even more like Lin Qingyu than like Xiao Cheng. “What hasn’t a physician seen? You needn’t be shocked.”

Gu Fuzhou had mimicked him so well that Lin Qingyu couldn’t retort to his words at all. He truly had seen a lot, and to him, this body part was just a bit of flesh. Back when Lu Wancheng was impotent, Lin Qingyu was even able to calmly suggest that he check it. So he didn’t know why he’d reacted like that just now either.

After some thought, he said, “Maybe it’s because you’re currently using Great General Gu’s body.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“I’ve admired Great General Gu for a long time, and I don’t want to disrespect him.”

Gu Fuzhou scoffed. “Hypocrite. You already crawled into my bed, and now you’re claiming that you’re not used to my current body?”

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say to that. He decided to give up. “You were right—I think my hand will break out in boils.”

Gu Fuzhou clapped, smiling. “Okay, okay. I’d expect that of Physician Lin.”

For the rest of the day, as soon as Gu Fuzhou saw Lin Qingyu, he grabbed his hand and examined it. “Why is your hand still fine, Physician Lin? When will it break out in boils…?”

Lin Qingyu couldn’t help but doubt his decision to marry Gu Fuzhou. That very night, he ordered servants to move the bunk bed from the Lin manor into their new bedroom.

After the wedding, Gu Fuzhou didn’t need to go to court for three days. When Lin Qingyu ordered the servants to put away his belongings, Gu Fuzhou stood idly by. Seeing a locked wooden chest, he asked casually, “What’s in there?”

Lin Qingyu glanced at it, then dismissed the servants and opened the chest. “Great General Gu’s spirit tablet. Is there a private room in the manor?”

“I’ll have Yuan Yin help you find one later… There are two tablets here, though. Who’s the other one for?”

“You can pick it up and see,” Lin Qingyu said. His tone was a bit odd.

Gu Fuzhou took out both tablets out. One was indeed dedicated to Great General Gu, but the other one…

Gu Fuzhou nearly threw the thing away. “What the heck is this? Who’s Jiang Dazhuang?!”

“On the day you passed away, I didn’t know whether you had truly died or not, so I set up an altar for you. That way, if you’d really died, you could still accept incense in the afterworld.”

“Thanks for the consideration,” Gu Fuzhou said, but he looked a bit conflicted. “Why did you think this was my name, though?”

The barest hint of a smile ghosted across Lin Qingyu's face. "You told me yourself. At first, you said that your name was Zhu Dazhuang. Then you changed your mind and said that your family name was Jiang. So, naturally, that meant your name was Jiang Dazhuang."

Gu Fuzhou laughed incredulously. "You clearly knew that I was joking. Why did you take it seriously?"

Lin Qingyu slammed the lid of the chest closed with a bang. "What else could I do? I stood no chance of guessing your real name." He swallowed. "I *asked* you, but you wouldn't tell me."

Gu Fuzhou furrowed his brow, looking serious. "When did you ask?"

"During the first week after your death." Lin Qingyu knew that it had only been a dream, and he felt ridiculous even talking about it, but he couldn't help himself. "I asked you. I asked you so many times—I chased after you asking. But you still walked away without looking back."

"That wasn't a dream…?" Gu Fuzhou murmured. "Fuck, can you dream in co-op mode?"

Lin Qingyu's eyes flashed. "What does that mean?"

He sat by the table, watching as Gu Fuzhou dragged a chair over and sat next to him. Although both were seated, Gu Fuzhou was still much taller and had to lower his head as he spoke. "I'm sorry, Qingyu. I didn't know at the time that I would survive."

Lin Qingyu was surprised. "You…know about that dream?"

Gu Fuzhou nodded. "After it, I woke up in Great General Gu's body."

"So that *was* you?" Lin Qingyu stood up abruptly. "You really didn't want to tell me your name…"

“I just thought that, if I died, it might be easier to forget me if you didn’t know my name.”

Lin Qingyu gritted his teeth. “You know I never forget anything. I can’t even forget that rooster I prostrated myself with. Why would you think that I could forget you?”

Gu Fuzhou laughed softly. “I’m sorry.” He took Lin Qingyu’s hand. Since Lin Qingyu was standing now, he was the one who had to gaze down at Gu Fuzhou, who looked back up at him. “I’ll tell you now, okay? My name’s really pretty.”

“I don’t want to know anymore,” Lin Qingyu said calmly, turning his head away. “I don’t care what you’re called. It has nothing to do with me.”

“Oh no, oh no,” Gu Fuzhou said seriously. “This seems like the angriest you’ve been since we reunited, Physician Lin. You’re even angrier than you were when Shen Huaishi failed to assassinate the crown prince—whether that was due to a mistake, or a decision to show Xiao Cheng mercy.”

Lin Qingyu truly was angry. When he thought of his feeling of loss after he’d awoken from that dream, he wanted to choke Gu Fuzhou to death.

“You probably won’t feel better even if I let you touch my abs,” Gu Fuzhou added. “So how about you bury your face in them?”

Lin Qingyu was already irate, and this young man was in the mood to joke?

His face expressionless, Lin Qingyu replied, “No. I’m afraid my face will break out in boils.”

Chapter 67

NOW THAT LIN QINGYU had remarried, Huantong and Hualu had followed him to the general's manor.

Both servants held conflicted feelings about Gu Fuzhou, but Huantong wasn't too affected by them. After all, he was Lin Qingyu's servant, so whatever Lin Qingyu wanted to do, Huantong approved of wholeheartedly. He felt a bit sorry for Young Marquess Lu, but the great general was a true hero. Just yesterday, Huantong had seen Gu Fuzhou somehow enrage his young master, and to placate him, the great general had gone to his training ground and broken a boulder over his chest. Could Young Marquess Lu have done that? Never mind a boulder—just placing a brick on the young marquess's chest would have killed him within the hour.

Just as water flowed from a higher to a lower elevation, humans strove to move from a lower to a higher social status. Huantong's young master would only have married someone even better than Young Marquess Lu. That was natural.

Hualu's loyalties were just as clear. She had been the servant closest to Lu Wancheng; when he was alive, he'd treated her like a younger sister. She was willing to follow Lin Qingyu partly because she respected and cared for him, but mostly for Young Marquess Lu. She knew that Lin Qingyu had been the person the young marquess cared and worried most about, so she wanted to stay by Lin Qingyu and care for him in the young marquess's stead.

Yet Lin Qingyu seemed to have completely forgotten the young marquess. He'd only just married Great General Gu, yet the pair were already

glued at the hip. Lin Qingyu had even brought that bunk bed into his new wedding bedroom—and the young marquess himself had designed it! Hualu couldn't even imagine how sad the young marquess would be if he found out about that in the afterlife. It was true that she admired the great general, but if she'd had to choose between them, she would definitely have stood with the young marquess.

Hualu was quite young and innocent, so she wore all her emotions on her sleeve. When she looked at Gu Fuzhou, her gaze was always sour and petulant. Meanwhile, Gu Fuzhou had guessed her train of thought, and he was once again ready to commit mischief.

The end of the year was imminent, and the days grew colder and colder. It hadn't yet snowed, but the winter wind sliced across their faces like blades. Gu Fuzhou must have gone crazy one day, because he didn't want to stay in one of their warm rooms, instead dragging Lin Qingyu into the courtyard for dinner.

Gu Fuzhou ordered servants to carry a stove outside. Charcoal burned within the stove, and on top was a flat rock Gu Fuzhou had washed clean. Once the rock was hot, he brushed a layer of oil on it, then placed the meat slices the chef had prepared onto the stone to roast. Hot oil dripped from the meat, sizzling mouthwateringly.

Lin Qingyu was fascinated. This was his first time seeing such a method of cooking. Gu Fuzhou had started by grilling sliced mutton, and he placed the slices into Lin Qingyu's bowl. "Taste them, Qingyu."

Lin Qingyu bit carefully into the meat. "I can only say it's decent," he said reservedly. "The mutton taste is still heavy."

“Isn’t that the appeal of mutton, though?” Gu Fuzhou now picked up a piece of pork belly with the perfect ratio of fat and lean meat. “Try this next. Open your mouth.”

Lin Qingyu hesitated but opened his mouth, letting Gu Fuzhou feed him. In his peripheral vision, Gu Fuzhou could see Hualu looking resentful again. He raised his voice. “Qingyu, did you eat roast meat with your late husband?”

Lin Qingyu was speechless. *What in the world is he planning to do now?*

Gu Fuzhou rubbed his chin. “I’ve heard that Young Marquess Lu was so weak that he needed a wheelchair to go anywhere and couldn’t stomach greasy foods like this. How could you have had any fun with him?”

“You’re right, General,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “It’s a good thing Young Marquess Lu died early.”

Hualu’s eyes nearly popped out of her head as she stared disbelievingly at Lin Qingyu. *H-how could Young Master say that?!*

“So do you like Young Marquess Lu or me better?” Gu Fuzhou pressed.

Lin Qingyu rolled his eyes. “Are you done yet?”

Even his eyeroll was beautiful. Gu Fuzhou smiled. “You can tell the truth. I won’t envy someone who died.”

Lin Qingyu saw that Hualu was on the verge of tears. “In that case, I preferred Young Marquess Lu.”

“Young Master…” Hualu said, touched.

Gu Fuzhou acted shocked and disappointed, although he didn't stop feeding Lin Qingyu. "How can that be? Has anything I've done displeased you, my wife?"

Lin Qingyu's lips curved. "Young Marquess Lu was younger and prettier than you. I like young, pretty people. Is that wrong?"

The words rendered Gu Fuzhou speechless.

Lin Qingyu saw that the beef Gu Fuzhou had given him was still partly red. "This one's still raw."

"Medium-rare beef's the best," Gu Fuzhou told him.

Disgusted, Lin Qingyu threw the "medium-rare" beef into Gu Fuzhou's bowl. "You might as well put it out into the sun for a while. Completely rare beef would be even tastier."

Lin Qingyu's stated preference for "young, pretty people" caused Gu Fuzhou to toss and turn all night. Lin Qingyu slept on the bottom bunk, and the occasional creaks above him kept him from falling asleep.

"You weren't able to fall asleep as soon as your head touched the pillow?" he asked. "What's with you tonight?"

Gu Fuzhou flipped down from the top bunk to sit beside Lin Qingyu and asked dejectedly, "Qingyu, did you really like Lu Wancheng's body better?"

So that was it.

Lu Wancheng and Gu Fuzhou were both among the most handsome of men, but in different ways. Lu Wancheng was noble, whereas Gu Fuzhou was dashing. Lin Qingyu enjoyed looking at them both, but if he had to choose,

he preferred the young man's current form. The most important thing was that he had a healthy body; nothing else mattered as much.

Lin Qingyu could tell that Gu Fuzhou genuinely cared about this, so he stopped teasing him and answered seriously: "In terms of their outer appearances, Lu Wancheng and Gu Fuzhou both have strengths. And in terms of their core, they're both you. As long as that's the case, there's no difference to me."

Slowly, Gu Fuzhou smiled. The wind blew harshly, and he felt a bit cold wearing only his nightclothes. Slipping his hand under Lin Qingyu's blankets, he lay down beside him. "Your words are so kind—but if I became someone ugly, you definitely wouldn't have let me put my hand beneath your blankets."

Lin Qingyu couldn't argue with that. "True. I'd cut off your hand." He didn't judge anyone by their appearance, but he had to look at his husband every day. An ugly husband would have dampened his mood too much.

Gu Fuzhou's hand roamed farther and farther, but he still had his own limits. The worst thing he did was squeeze Lin Qingyu's waist; there was no extra flesh to grab onto. "The author of *Huai's Revenge on the Monarch* specified that you're the prettiest person in the entire novel. No one else's appearance could take your breath away."

Lin Qingyu thought for a while. "Someone's appearance took my breath away once."

"Really?" Gu Fuzhou sounded doubtful. "Whose?"

Lin Qingyu looked at him. "Really."

Gu Fuzhou seemed unhappy. "What did he look like?"

"…I forgot." He'd forgotten as soon as he woke up from that dream. All he could remember was how he'd felt.

"If their appearance surprised you that much, how could you forget it? Your memory's so good."

"I don't know." Anytime he remembered that dream, Lin Qingyu stopped wanting to be kind to Gu Fuzhou. He pushed the man's hand out from under his blankets. "Go away and go to sleep."

The third day after the wedding, they returned to the Lin manor, bringing gifts prepared by Yuan Yin. Gu Fuzhou had given Lin Qingyu full permission to choose them, so he'd brought twice as many gifts as the first time he'd returned home with his husband after their wedding. The Lin storerooms were stuffed to the brim; the family had to clear out a few rooms in their residence just to store the gifts.

Alongside Gu Fuzhou, Lin Qingyu once again presented tea to his parents. Then Gu Fuzhou took out the gift he'd prepared for Lin Qinghe—a sword Gu Fuzhou had wielded during his childhood. It was perfect for a young boy of Lin Qinghe's age, and he accepted the gift politely.

"Thank you, Great General."

Lin Qinghe had been brought up well by his parents and older brother, so in front of outsiders, he seemed like a proper young lord—he only acted playful in front of his family. But when Gu Fuzhou had still been Lu Wancheng, Lin Qinghe acted cute in front of him.

When Lin Qinghe treated him like a stranger, Gu Fuzhou couldn't help asking, "How did you refer to Young Marquess Lu, Qinghe?"

Thinking of Lu Wancheng, Lin Qinghe pouted. “I called him ‘Wancheng-gege,’” he said sadly.

“Then you can refer to me in the same way.”

Lin Qinghe snuck a glance at his brother, who nodded. “All right… Uncle Gu.”

Gu Fuzhou nearly cracked in half.

“Qinghe, don’t just say anything you want,” Lin Qingyu’s mother quickly said. “If you call him that, you’ll mess up the family hierarchy.”

“The general is twenty-some years older than Qinghe,” Lin Qingyu said smugly. “Qinghe would have trouble calling him gege.”

When they returned from the Lin manor, Gu Fuzhou sank into depression. Not because he’d been called Uncle Gu, but because his three days of wedding leave were over, and he’d have to wake up early to go to court the next morning.

Someone in the residence was even more depressed than Gu Fuzhou, though—Yuan Yin. Smiling bitterly, he sought out Lin Qingyu. “Tomorrow morning, Lady, I’m afraid I’ll have to trouble you with waking the general up.”

“Don’t worry,” Lin Qingyu said calmly.

Yuan Yin couldn’t not worry, so he elaborated, “Lady, you only just arrived, so you may not know this. As soon as the general returned from Yongliang, it was as if he’d developed a sleeping disorder. I couldn’t wake him, no matter what. Please begin trying to wake him an hour early so that he has time to adjust.”

Lin Qingyu's smile was mysterious. "I may have more experience in waking him than you do."

Yuan Yin was shocked but didn't dare ask. He could only smile apologetically. "Thank you, Lady."

Great Yu's morning court began at the mao hour,[15] so most officials had to rise at the yin hour.[16] As soon as the time arrived, Lin Qingyu washed and dressed, then woke Gu Fuzhou by pinching his nose and cutting off its airflow. "General, it's time to go to court."

Gu Fuzhou grabbed his blankets in agony. "I don't want to, Qingyu. I don't want to go to court."

"What use is it to tell me that?"

Gu Fuzhou closed his eyes. "I've decided—I'm going to excuse myself. Or maybe I should just throw away my armor and become a farmer."

Lin Qingyu ignored him and quickly pulled his blankets off, then summoned servants to help Gu Fuzhou wash up.

Morning crankiness made Gu Fuzhou's expression shockingly grim. His cold expression was intimidating and kept everyone at arm's length. Lin Qingyu ended up dismissing the servant girls in charge of dressing his husband and straightened out Gu Fuzhou's official clothes himself.

Gu Fuzhou lowered his head to watch Lin Qingyu focus on tying his belt, and most of his crankiness disappeared. "Will you walk me to court, Qingyu?" he asked.

Lin Qingyu glanced at him. "You still need someone to walk with you? How old are you?"

Gu Fuzhou didn't feel at all embarrassed. "I've heard Wu Zhan say that his wife walks with him anytime he leaves home, and anytime he returns home, he can eat her homemade soup. I admire them so much. Of course, I care about you too much to let you cook. After all, Physician Lin's hands are for doing more important things."

As Gu Fuzhou talked, Lin Qingyu picked up the general's hat. After a few attempts, he found that he couldn't reach Gu Fuzhou's head. "Bend down."

Gu Fuzhou lowered his head so Lin Qingyu could put on the hat.

Lin Qingyu looked him over. "I'll walk you to court."

Gu Fuzhou froze, then laughed. "I was joking. It's cold out. All you need to do is wait for me here."

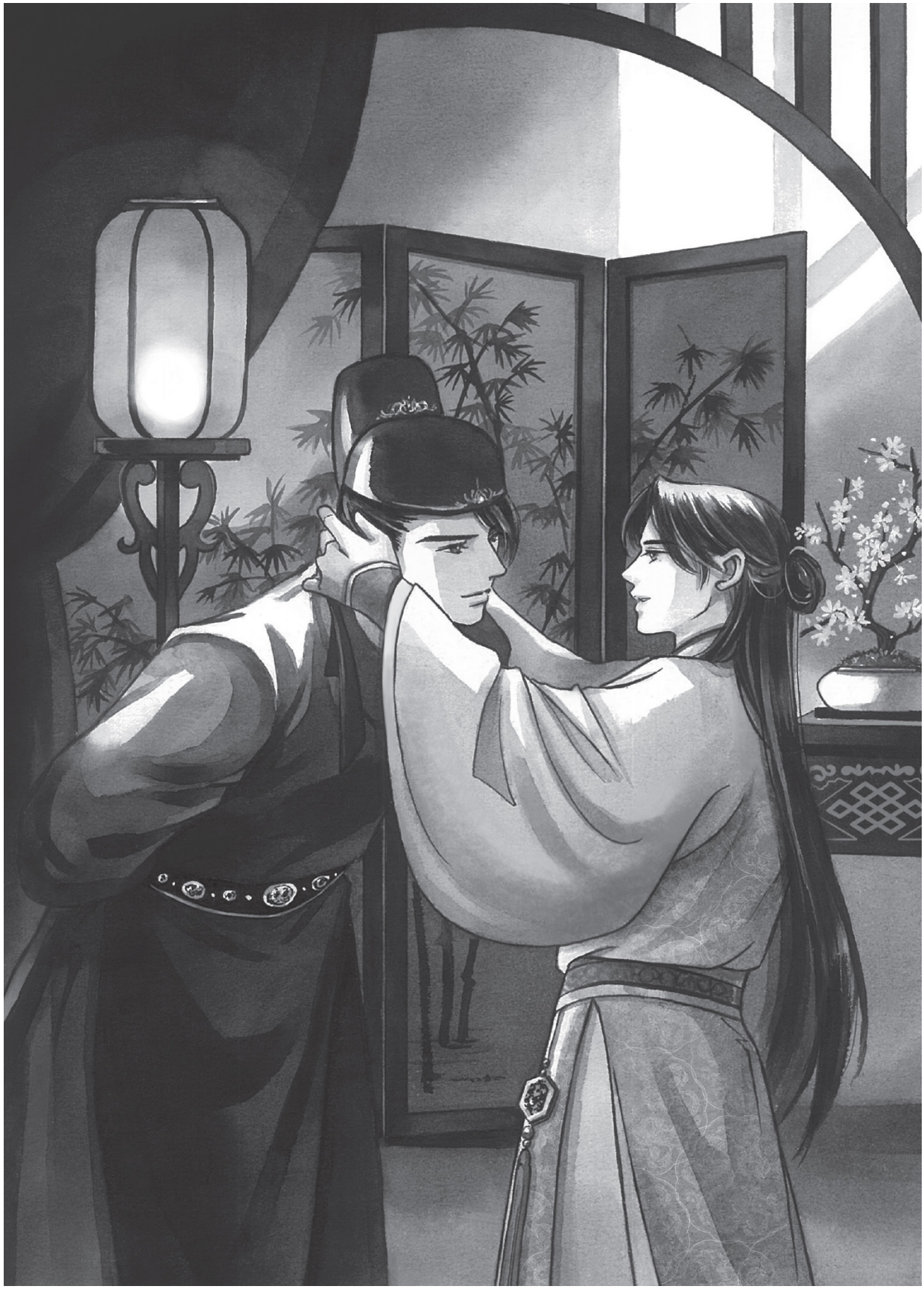
Lin Qingyu put on his snow-white fox-fur coat. "Stop with the pointless babbling. Let's go."

Laughing quietly to himself, Gu Fuzhou followed him. "Qingyu, do you know how people would say that in my hometown?"

"How?"

"Stop yapping."

"I'll remember that," Lin Qingyu said. "But don't you dislike it when I speak your hometown's dialect?"



Gu Fuzhou sighed. “Well, you’ve learned some already, so you might as well learn more. That way, if you went there someday, you could even communicate with my brethren with no problem.”

Lin Qingyu only walked the general to the manor’s gate. He watched Gu Fuzhou leave in a horse-drawn carriage, then asked Hualu—who stood behind him—“Do you understand, Hualu?”

Hualu didn’t. She shook her head, lost. “What should I understand, Young Master?”

Lin Qingyu smiled coldly. “Don’t marry a lazy laggard who’s also your junior. If you do, you might have to walk in the freezing winter weather at dawn just to see him off to court.”

Hualu got the gist, but she didn’t understand completely. Where was this laggard who was the young master’s junior?

Chapter 68

THE OFFICIALS SPENT the next few morning court sessions discussing the war between Great Yu and Western Xia. Western Xia's forces had now come back with a vengeance, complete with a new commander-in-chief and fighting style. But Zhao Mingwei was nowhere to be found; after losing three minor battles in a row, his strategy was now to station Great Yu's army in the city and defend it while simultaneously requesting help from the capital. In that memorial, Zhao Mingwei once again emphasized that he couldn't fulfill the duties of the commander-in-chief, and that he hoped that His Majesty could convince Great General Gu to return to the battlefield quickly.

The emperor sat up in his throne, gazing down upon the officials led by Xiao Cheng, who stood at the very front. The father-son pair looked quite similar now—both were thin and sickly. The emperor held his hand to his forehead, his eyebrows furrowing tightly. The hubbub of the officials' discussions—Xiao Cheng's muffled, intermittent coughs included—reached his ear without fail, and his head felt as if it were splitting.

For his part, Xiao Cheng was using all his willpower to stand up in court. Shen Huaishi's sword had pierced straight into his left lung. Unless a physician capable of miracles reincarnated nearby, the crown prince wouldn't be able to live life normally again.

Likewise using all his willpower to stand in court was Gu Fuzhou. His eyelids drooped as he stood upright. Everyone assumed that he was resting his eyes, deep in thought.

“Great General Gu and Lin-gongzi have only been married a few days, and now you’re rushing him to the battlefield? He hasn’t even warmed his marriage bed yet,” said General Wu Zhan, Gu Fuzhou’s friend.

The prime minister stroked his beard. “General Wu, that’s neither here nor there. Home exists only because the country exists, and the country is in danger. Would Great General Gu be so greedy for pleasure as to leave the three hundred thousand soldiers in the northwest alone and helpless?”

“What danger is the country in? Prime Minister Cui is overexaggerating. We’re just fighting a few bandits from Western Xia,” Wu Zhan said angrily. He stepped out of his position and kneeled. “Your Majesty, give me ten thousand elite soldiers, and I’ll immediately go northwest with them so we can serve as reinforcements for General Zhao. We’ll win the war for Great Yu within three months!”

“Crazy words.” The prime minister shook his head. “You’re too confident in your own abilities.”

Wu Zhan was furious. “Me—too confident in my own abilities? If *you* can do it, *you* go!”

The emperor simply watched the two argue, then suddenly asked, “Crown Prince, what do you think?”

Xiao Cheng’s expression didn’t change at all, as though he hadn’t heard anything. He was clearly distracted.

“Crown Prince!” the emperor barked.

Xiao Cheng finally came back to his senses. “I agree.”

“You agree? With whom?”

“Naturally, Prime Minister Cui.” Xiao Cheng coughed some more. “I’m not feeling well—I’ve been rude in court. I hope you’ll forgive me, Royal Father.”

In light of Xiao Cheng’s health, the emperor held back his anger, asking Gu Fuzhou, “Beloved General Gu, what do you think?”

Gu Fuzhou remained silent and still.

When he was ignored for the second time in a row, the emperor could no longer bear the disrespect and slammed his hand down on the table. “Gu Fuzhou!” he roared.

Gu Fuzhou’s eyes opened, a hint of confusion flashing rapidly through them. He saw Wu Zhan kneeling, looking as though he was offering to do something, and guessed vaguely what the emperor was asking. “General Wu is certainly a capable general, but not a commander-in-chief. I consider him best suited to the vanguard.”

Wu Zhan kept trying to signal Gu Fuzhou, who simply ignored him. “Furthermore, the terrain of the northwest is mostly plains and deserts. General Wu excels in sea battle. Sending him northwest wouldn’t be a sound decision.”

Gu Fuzhou’s words were reasonable, and the emperor—who couldn’t find anything wrong with the general’s logic—could only calm down. “Beloved General Gu makes a good point. Wu Zhan isn’t a good choice to command the northwest.”

The prime minister took the opportunity to speak up. “Great General Gu spent many years in the northwest. No one understands how to fight on

plains and deserts better than him. Great General Gu, and no one else, must be commander-in-chief of the army conquering Western Xia."

The minister of national defense agreed. "The great general came back to the capital secretly to neutralize the heavenly arachnid poison in his body. Now that he's been cured and even married in a great procession, it's impossible to hide his return. Western Xia only dared act out because they know the great general is no longer in Yongliang. They will only grow bolder if the great general doesn't return to quell our army's doubts."

Gu Fuzhou frowned and placed his hand on his chest. "I am willing to lead the army into war."

"No!" Wu Zhan said hurriedly. "The heavenly arachnid poison may have been neutralized, but repeated poisonings and injuries have permanently damaged the great general's health. The physician said that if the great general wished to live a few more years, he must remain in the capital and rest."

The physician Wu Zhan spoke of was Gu Fuzhou's new wife. A few days ago, Wu Zhan had visited the general, who didn't care much for social convention and invited Wu Zhan to drink with his new wife at the same table. The general's wife had told him about the great general's health at that point.

"For the sake of Great Yu, I am willing to sacrifice my life," Gu Fuzhou said quietly.

"That won't do!" Wu Zhan exclaimed. "The great general's life and death concern the country too. If he is forced back to the northwest now and suffers a relapse, will that not play right into the hands of those bandits from Western Xia?!"

The emperor's head hurt so much he could hardly bear it. He hoped that Xiao Cheng would take charge of the situation, but after replying to the one question the emperor had asked him, the crown prince didn't say a single word more. No one knew what he was thinking.

How had the crown prince, whom the emperor had placed such hope in, turned out like this?

"We'll discuss who the commander-in-chief should be later. For now, put a temporary plan in place so that Zhao Mingwei has something to do. Court is dismissed." The emperor stood, exhausted, his body wobbling.

The officials all kneeled, imploring, "Your Majesty, please take care of yourself."

After leaving court, Gu Fuzhou and Wu Zhan walked together. "Why don't you want me going northwest, Great General?" Wu Zhan asked.

"You weren't suited to the northwest in the first place," said Gu Fuzhou. If Wu Zhan went, he'd just be giving himself up to the enemy; Gu Fuzhou would rather that that didn't happen.

"But if I don't go, Great General, then you'll have to go. Are you willing to abandon your new wife and stay in the desolate northwest for so many years, returning as an old man?" Wu Zhan joked.

"Naturally," Gu Fuzhou proclaimed. "A man's ambitions reach all the world's corners. How could I let romantic bonds confine me to a certain place?"

Wu Zhan was immediately humbled. "Great General, you are truly our generation's role model!"

After parting from Wu Zhan, Gu Fuzhou saw a eunuch walking toward him holding a vase. The vase was almost as tall as a small child; the eunuch carrying it couldn't see the road in front of him.

The eunuch leading Gu Fuzhou was afraid that this individual would block Great General Gu's path. "Xiaosongzi, walk more slowly."

"Xiaosongzi?" Gu Fuzhou said. "Is this Xiaosongzi from Qinzheng Hall?"

Xiaosongzi struggled to peek out from behind the vase. When he saw Gu Fuzhou, he said quickly, "I do work at Qinzheng Hall, Great General."

The corners of Gu Fuzhou's lips curved. "I've admired you for a long time."

Xiaosongzi was astonished. He was just a eunuch, so how could Great General Gu admire him? "You must be joking, General. I'm the one who has long admired the revered Great General Gu."

"You're too humble." Gu Fuzhou turned to the eunuch leading him. "This Xiaosongzi will walk me to the gate."

When the other eunuch took the vase and left, Gu Fuzhou told Xiaosongzi, "I've heard my wife mention you before."

"Imperial Physician Lin—I mean, the general's wife—used to treat us servants' illnesses."

Gu Fuzhou nodded slightly. "Didn't His Majesty recover from his migraines? Why does he look so ill today?"

Xiaosongzi's tongue was as loose as a songbird's, as his name suggested. He didn't even hesitate before replying: "The emperor was feeling much better before, Great General. But as soon as winter came, his migraines

suddenly worsened. Neither medicine nor acupuncture helps; not even Head Imperial Physician Lin knows what to do."

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Gu Fuzhou returned home; before he even opened his mouth, Yuan Yin told him, "The lady should be in the study right now."

Gu Fuzhou tossed his hat to Yuan Yin and headed straight for the study. The door was open, and when he swept aside the curtain that blocked the wind, he saw Lin Qingyu sitting by the window, dressed in white. He seemed to be playing a game of weiqi[17] against himself, holding a weiqi manual while turning a black piece between the tips of his fingers absentmindedly. His face was striking, but his aura was as cold as the moon, almost divine and otherworldly. Beside him, Huantong silently added more charcoal to the stove.

Fuck—let my romantic bonds confine me here until I die, please! What did "a man's ambitions" have to do with him? He just wanted to sleep until he woke up naturally, then look at this great beauty in the comfort of his own home.

Engrossed in the weiqi manual, Lin Qingyu didn't notice that anyone had entered the room until he heard a familiar voice.

"Lin Qingyu—"

Lin Qingyu raised his head. "What happened?"

"What do you mean, 'What happened?'"

"You never call me Lin Qingyu."

“Then what do I usually call you?” Gu Fuzhou asked pointedly.

“Qingyu, or Physician Lin.” Lin Qingyu frowned slightly. “Did something happen?”

“Nope.” Gu Fuzhou smiled, looking slightly mischievous. “The thing is, Huantong is still here, so I didn’t think I should act too lovey-dovey. After all, he still hasn’t married, and he’ll be jealous if he sees us too in love.”

“Will not!” Huantong yelled, feeling wronged.

Lin Qingyu was displeased as well. “Don’t call me by my full name next time. I’m not used to that.”

Gu Fuzhou coughed, trying to hide his satisfaction. “I’ll try my best not to.” Lying down across from Lin Qingyu, he took a white weiqi piece, tossing it up and down. “Qingyu,” he said casually, “your wedding leave ends soon too.”

Lin Qingyu had mentioned to Gu Fuzhou that the medication used to treat the emperor’s migraines contained the wings of golden silkworm gu. Golden silkworm gu looked different during each of the four seasons, so the medication had to change accordingly. Not even his father was aware of this secret ingredient, so when the weather turned cold soon and the previous prescription failed, the emperor would have to summon Lin Qingyu if he didn’t want to suffer from migraines.

Thus, Lin Qingyu wasn’t surprised at all that his leave was ending. “Really?”

Soon, Hualu came to call them for dinner. After the meal, Gu Fuzhou went to the training ground to lift weights in agony, and Lin Qingyu

continued his unfinished solo weiqi game. When night fell, the two finally returned to their bunk bed.

In the middle of the night, Lin Qingyu woke up thirsty and saw a light in the room. Gu Fuzhou had lit a candle and seemed to be deep in thought, writing something down with a brush.

Lin Qingyu was used to seeing Gu Fuzhou act silly, and only in the rare instances when he acted more seriously did Lin Qingyu remember that this young man was just as cunning as himself. Gu Fuzhou was usually just too lazy to think about such schemes.

Lin Qingyu sat up; Gu Fuzhou heard the noise and looked over. “Did I wake you?”

“I was thinking about that new general from Western Xia and his tactics.” Gu Fuzhou looked down at the enemy marching routes that he’d drawn from memory and from Zhao Mingwei’s description in his memorial to the emperor. “They’re quite interesting.”

“Why don’t you think about them during the day?”

“Because I want to kick back during the day,” Gu Fuzhou said without hesitation.

Lin Qingyu left the bed, put on his cloak, and poured himself a cup of tea. “So you’re worried about the war in the northwest?”

“No. I’m just letting my thoughts wander.” Gu Fuzhou held the brush horizontally. “That general’s strong, yes, but let him be. I choose to be a lazy homebody.”

Lin Qingyu backed away, cautiously eyeing the brush in Gu Fuzhou’s fingers. As long as Gu Fuzhou was thinking hard, Lin Qingyu ran the risk of

getting splattered with ink.

Gu Fuzhou stopped moving. “What?”

“Do you want to get me dirty again?” Lin Qingyu demanded.

Gu Fuzhou blinked. After confirming his intentions, he smiled. “Oh no. I think I sort of do.”

Chapter 69

GU FUZHOU REALLY WANTED to do it. This was absolutely unbelievable.

Well, it wasn't like he hadn't thought about it during the past nineteen years of his life. Any healthy male thought about it somehow during puberty, and he'd been no exception. When he was thirteen or fourteen, his father had solemnly taught him a "biology" lesson, then insisted that he hold himself to the strictest degree of self-control and respect for others.

He still remembered how he'd felt after the first time he jerked off—*That was it? My wrist hurts so much just for* that*?* It felt good, of course, but it wasn't even close to worth the effort. He was lazy, but he also cared a lot about personal hygiene. Even if he was doing it by himself, he had to shower before and after; the entire process took more than an hour. Frankly, he preferred to use that hour to get more sleep.

Later, when he was about sixteen or seventeen, he discovered that his classmates—especially the boys—seemed very interested in that kind of thing. His friend had once shown him a video that should've been off-limits to teens like them; his friend got so aroused that his entire face turned red, but he had just felt bad for the man in the video. He had *worked* for so long without stopping, sweating buckets. Didn't his back hurt? It looked so exhausting that he felt tired just watching it.

When he told his friend his thoughts, his friend seemed gobsmacked, declaring that he must be disinterested in sex. He disagreed. He wasn't

disinterested—just too lazy to move. If his future wife would put in extra effort, he would be quite happy to do it.

In any case, he outwardly appeared to have no base desires simply because he was so lazy. Even if he liked someone, he never thought about them in that way specifically. Was sexual desire a requirement for liking someone? Must he want to fuck the person he liked? As long as they were happy together, everything else was okay with him.

He only realized from Lin Qingyu's question that he did, in fact, want to have sex with his wife. Even if it was tiring, it…it would be worth it.

"Have sex" was actually the relatively polite way to put it, because he wanted to use more vulgar words. He wanted to dirty Lin Qingyu, wanted to leave all kinds of marks on his body, wanted to stain him with his scent. He even wanted to whisper obscene dirty talk into his ear.

Funnily enough, he wouldn't have even realized that he had such a kink if Lin Qingyu hadn't used the word "dirty."

After recognizing his own desires, Gu Fuzhou suddenly felt so greasy, so perverted—why did he have such a depraved side? If he started lusting over Lin Qingyu's body, what would make him different from someone like Xiao Cheng or the emperor? He felt like a soldier sitting up in his deathbed in shock, having realized that *he* had been the bad guy all along.

No, wait—the bottom line was that Lin Qingyu was his wife! What was wrong with lusting after his own wife? The others lusting after his wife were the bad guys.

That icy beauty could only be admired, not desecrated.

But he *really* wanted to.

Now that he had worldly desires, Gu Fuzhou couldn't help but wonder… Would Lin Qingyu, as a man, *also* have such desires?

Naturally, Lin Qingyu didn't know what was on Gu Fuzhou's odd mind. He only felt like his husband's gaze was deeper than before, and no longer so pure, as if he had suddenly matured.

They returned to bed. Gu Fuzhou—who had long forgotten about enemy tactics—rested his head on his hands as he stared into space. "Qingyu, you're nearly twenty."

"Yes."

"That's the age when people have the most energy. How come I've never seen you do…*it*…? You know what I mean, right?" Gu Fuzhou thought that he had asked the question extremely clearly. Given Lin Qingyu's intelligence, he'd definitely get it.

But Lin Qingyu said, "No."

"Come on. You definitely know what I'm talking about. Or maybe you're not interested in that kind of thing either?" Gu Fuzhou teased.

"That's true, I'm not. But why did you say 'either'?"

Gu Fuzhou's attention was completely captured by Lin Qingyu's first sentence. "But…you're not lazy. Why aren't *you* interested in it?"

Lin Qingyu thought for a while. "I've probably seen too much and touched too many people." He had seen countless male and female bodies. He wasn't skilled in gynecology, but he had studied it. In fact, while studying with his teacher, he had even helped a woman give birth.

He couldn't remember ever having a noteworthy reaction to touching someone's body. Only touching Gu Fuzhou made him feel like his hand

would break out in boils; even passing his hand over *that* area, he'd be nervous.

For a moment, Gu Fuzhou didn't know what to say. Finally he muttered, "Physicians are scary."

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Gu Fuzhou slept late, so the next morning was another disaster. Lin Qingyu dragged the general out of bed, telling Hualu to bring breakfast to their room so that Lin Qingyu could watch Gu Fuzhou eat congee miserably.

"Qingyu, when is the next break going to start?"

Besides their long break at the beginning of the year, officials of Great Yu only got the fifteenth day of each month off. Lin Qingyu calculated the date for him. "In ten days."

Gu Fuzhou's handsome face twisted. "Ten days? H-help me…"

After the general had dressed, Lin Qingyu was about to see him off when Yuan Yin hurried over. "General, Lady, the palace has delivered a message: His Majesty is suffering from an unbearable headache, and the crown prince's wound has flared up, so today's morning court meeting is canceled."

This out-of-the-blue surprise made Gu Fuzhou so ecstatic that he was giddy. Apart from their second wedding night, Lin Qingyu had never seen him so excited. Yuan Yin hadn't even finished speaking when Gu Fuzhou disappeared. Then, in the blink of an eye, a human body appeared on the bed, forming a lump underneath the covers.

Lin Qingyu laughed softly and ordered the servants to avoid the bedroom today so that the general could sleep his fill.

Soon after the cancellation message, a palace servant dropped by. The emperor's condition was worsening by the day, and the Department of Imperial Physicians was out of ideas. The emperor could no longer bear the pain, which forced him to summon Lin Qingyu once again.

Lin Qingyu took the emperor's pulse and modified his prescription. After the emperor drank the reformulated medicine for a few days, his symptoms lessened dramatically. Per protocol, he should have bestowed many rare and expensive gifts upon Lin Qingyu, but he was still angry. As soon as he thought about the fact that the gentle, obedient beauty in front of him was already someone else's wife—that even he, the emperor, couldn't make the man his—he became indignant and bitter.

Had Lin Qingyu been the wife of a mere official, the emperor would simply have forcibly taken him. But he wasn't just anyone's wife; he was Gu Fuzhou's.

Not long afterward, Gu Fuzhou presented the emperor with a careful analysis detailing the conditions they should create on the northwest battlefield, from the deployment of soldiers and cavalry to the quantity of rations. As little as he wanted to, the emperor sent the memorial off.

However, the emperor refused to reinstate Lin Qingyu as an imperial physician, and Lin Qingyu never inquired about it. He only said that, since he was unsure about some medications' side effects, he needed to enter the Imperial Academy of Medicine to consult the medical texts in the library. Thus, the emperor gave him back the right to enter the academy. Lin Qingyu also needed to enter the palace once every three days to take the emperor's

pulse. Nothing was different from before, except that he now held no official position and received no salary. However, Lin Qingyu didn't care about either of those things these days.

Marrying Gu Fuzhou had only solved his immediate problems. If he wanted to live peacefully with the general for the rest of his life, they both still had a lot to do.

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After waiting what seemed like ages, Gu Fuzhou finally welcomed his monthly rest day. Unfortunately, Lin Qingyu had to go to the palace on that day. As he got out of bed, Lin Qingyu moved slowly, making sure to be quiet, but he decided on second thought that there was no need to be so deliberate about it. Since when could Gu Fuzhou be awoken so easily?

As soon as Lin Qingyu stood up, though, a low, hoarse voice floated down from the top bunk. "Qingyu…"

"Why are you awake?" Lin Qingyu asked in surprise.

Gu Fuzhou's eyes remained closed. "You need to go to the palace today," he said weakly. "I'll see you off."

Lin Qingyu went still, a warmth that he shouldn't have felt during the cold winter rising in his chest. Despite this, he responded, "You're still half asleep. How will you see me off?"

Gu Fuzhou sat up, blearily rubbing his eyes and saying mechanically, "As sleepy as I am, I still need to see my wife off…"

"No need. You can continue to sleep," Lin Qingyu said, amused.

“No way.” Gu Fuzhou forced himself out of bed. “You see me off every day. How horrible would I be if I didn’t reciprocate?”

Gu Fuzhou was so insistent that Lin Qingyu simply let him do as he wished. He initially thought that Gu Fuzhou would stop at the manor gates, like Lin Qingyu always did—but instead, Gu Fuzhou climbed into the carriage with him, seeing him all the way to the palace. Although Gu Fuzhou dozed on his shoulder the entire way there, and they didn’t exchange a single word, Lin Qingyu was indescribably touched by the sincerity behind this precious gesture.

Once Lin Qingyu entered the palace, a eunuch came to lead him to Qinzheng Hall. The head of the Tianji Guard, Lord Xie, was just leaving. As they passed each other, Lin Qingyu caught a whiff of a faint fragrance.

He quickly discovered where this scent came from when the emperor showed him an item—a crystal-clear snow-lotus blossom. Just from the sheen of its petals, Lin Qingyu could tell that this was no ordinary flower.

“Look at this,” the emperor said. “Will this help with my migraines?”

Lin Qingyu sniffed the snow lotus’s subtle scent. “Your Majesty, may I ask whether this item originated in the North Kingdom?”

The emperor seemed surprised to hear the question. “Yes, it was apparently plucked from the North Kingdom’s northernmost area.”

Lin Qingyu smiled faintly. “It truly is a rare and priceless medication. I will write Your Majesty a new prescription that includes snow lotus. I’m sure it will drastically improve the medication’s effects.”

After leaving the palace, Lin Qingyu spent the rest of the day in the Imperial Academy of Medicine’s library, returning to the manor only at dusk.

As soon as he stepped out of the carriage, he saw that another carriage was parked in front of the gates. It looked incredibly extravagant, much too gaudy for a normal official to use. Thus, it was clear who the visitor was.

This carriage had only arrived seconds before Lin Qingyu's, and its owner saw Lin Qingyu immediately. "It's the beautiful imperial physician!"

"I am no longer an imperial physician, Your Highness," said Lin Qingyu.

"Then I'll call you Physician Lin." The visitor was the fourth prince, Xiao Jie, joined by his constantly present steward, Xi Rong.

Lin Qingyu felt nothing toward beautiful fools; he was only interested in intelligent people. Hence, he focused more on Xi Rong than Xiao Jie, although he did ask the prince, "Have you made plans with the general, Your Highness?"

"Not really—well, sort of. Before, the great general said that he would show me the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear and his Ferghana horse. Today, as I passed by, I suddenly remembered, and…" Xiao Jie trailed off with an embarrassed laugh.

Xi Rong bowed to Lin Qingyu. "His Highness was struck with inspiration and came without an invitation," he said politely. "Apologies for disturbing you and the general, Lady. If Great General Gu is busy, I shall send a message before bringing His Highness next time."

"The general is resting today, so he's not busy. Please, Your Highness, come in."

Entering the manor, Xiao Jie looked around curiously. "Where is Great General Gu?"

“At this hour, probably enjoying himself,” Lin Qingyu guessed.

Looking confused, Xiao Jie raised his face to Xi Rong. “The great general likes to enjoy himself too?”

“Great General Gu may enjoy himself in a different way from you, Your Highness,” Xi Rong said.

Xiao Jie grinned. “I understand. I enjoy eating and drinking, but the great general enjoys riding horses and shooting arrows?”

Xi Rong nodded with a smile. “Your Highness’s intelligence is unmatched.”

“Please wait for a moment in the hall, Your Highness. I’ll go fetch the general. Huantong,” Lin Qingyu called, “serve His Highness tea.”

When Xiao Jie tasted the tea, his eyes lit up, compliments flowing from his tongue: “This is delicious! I think it’s even tastier than the palace’s tea! You taste it too, A-Rong!”

Xi Rong shook his head. “You mustn’t forget your superior status, Your Highness. I am but a servant.”

Xiao Jie was a bit disappointed. “All right.”

“Do you not find this odd, Your Highness?” Xi Rong asked. “According to etiquette, the general’s wife should have stayed to entertain his guests, so why is the lady personally fetching the general? The lady doesn’t seem like the kind of person who’d be ignorant of etiquette.”

Xiao Jie thought about that, but he didn’t have an answer. “Why?”

The barest hint of a smile hung on Xi Rong’s face. “Perhaps he had some secret things to tell the general.”

***

Lin Qingyu found Gu Fuzhou in the bedroom. The general wore a black blindfold, and a porcelain medicine bottle hung in front of him. One end of a red string was tied to the bottle; the other end was tied to the rafters.

When he heard Lin Qingyu's footsteps, Gu Fuzhou tugged the blindfold up, revealing mirthful eyes. "Qingyu, Qingyu—let me show you something fun."

He pulled the blindfold down again and pushed the porcelain bottle, which began to swing back and forth. Gu Fuzhou likewise swayed, but left to right, perfectly dodging the bottle each time so that he was never hit. He was having so much fun that his smile lit up the entire room.

"What do you think? I've been practicing for an entire hour."

Lin Qingyu walked over and steadied the swinging bottle. "Xiao Jie and his eunuch are here."

Gu Fuzhou raised his eyebrows. "Now?"

"Yes. They're already inside the manor."

When Gu Fuzhou smelled Lin Qingyu's faint, familiar scent, he smiled even wider. He reached out, pretending to reach for the bottle, but sneakily grasped Lin Qingyu's waist instead.

Letting Gu Fuzhou hold him, Lin Qingyu tore the blindfold off his face. "And, as expected, Xiao Cheng sent the Tianji Guard to the North Kingdom. The emperor should be unhappy with that decision."

Impressively, Gu Fuzhou could still think logically even while distracted by the beauty in his arms, who smelled pleasantly of herbs. “You mean…today? Would it still be too early?”

Lin Qingyu pushed him away. “You don’t need to promise the steward too much. Just test him a little.”

They returned to the front hall to entertain their guests. Before Xiao Jie and Xi Rong, Gu Fuzhou’s behavior was introverted and serious; he acted like a man of few words and fewer smiles. Even Xi Rong probably couldn’t have imagined that, just moments earlier, Great General Gu had been laughing in his bedroom as he practiced dodging a porcelain bottle.

After some small talk, Gu Fuzhou ordered the servants to present the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear to the prince. The spear was extremely heavy, and few people could hold it with ease. At least two grown men were required to lift it.

Xiao Jie circled the spear, exclaiming in admiration. He turned to Xi Rong excitedly. “A-Rong, do you feel the bloodlust of the northwestern deserts?”

“Spears are nourished by blood,” Xi Rong remarked. “Naturally, the great general’s spear has a soul of its own.”

Xiao Jie tried to pick up the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear, but however hard he tried, he could barely lift it an inch from the ground. “This spear’s hefty enough to pulverize someone, but Great General Gu can use it one-handed to kill countless enemies. No wonder you’re seen as Great Yu’s war god,” he exclaimed.

Gu Fuzhou faced the prince’s compliments with the same unflagging

reticence. “You flatter me, Your Highness.”

After Xiao Jie finished admiring the spear, Gu Fuzhou led them to the stables, where a handsome horse was drinking water. At the scent of strangers, the horse raised its head, alert, and swished its tail nervously.

This horse was as black as ink, with slender, sculpted limbs and a thick mane. It looked quite different from the commonplace horses one saw in public. The only thing was that it had gotten much fatter since it had first arrived in the capital.

Xiao Jie couldn’t stop complimenting the steed. “What’s its name?”

Lin Qingyu glanced at Gu Fuzhou in amusement. “Little White.”

Xiao Jie looked confused. “But it’s black.”

“Indeed,” Gu Fuzhou said seriously. “Would Your Highness like to ride him?”

“M-me?” Xiao Jie looked ecstatic. “Can I?”

Xi Rong didn’t approve. “Prized horses usually have strong personalities, and they’re loyal to their owners—and Your Highness isn’t adept at riding, so please reconsider.”

“Nothing will happen as long as I’m here,” said Gu Fuzhou.

Xiao Jie stroked Little White’s jet-black mane, already excited. “It’ll be fine as long as we go slow, right? A-Rong?”

Xi Rong sighed helplessly and shrugged. “I can only ask the great general to take care of you.”

Gu Fuzhou and Xiao Jie began riding horses while Lin Qingyu and Xi Rong stood by to watch. It wasn’t hard to tell that Xiao Jie and Xi Rong’s relationship wasn’t as simple as master and servant. Xiao Jie clearly relied

heavily on Xi Rong; Gu Fuzhou had said as much. But Lin Qingyu couldn't see Xi Rong's perverted, debased side. The eunuch must've been adept at hiding his true colors.

Putting on a show of nonchalance, Lin Qingyu said, "His Highness is quite naive. It'll be good when the crown prince becomes emperor, and His Highness is simply the ruler of his own princedom."

Xi Rong's eyes dimmed, but he quickly smiled, looking as beautiful as a woman. "Correct, Lady."

Chapter 70

XIAO JIE WAS HAVING a lot of fun; he wouldn't return for a while, so Huantong carried over a table, chair, and heater.

"Please sit while you wait, Young Master."

"Get a second chair for Steward Xi," Lin Qingyu ordered.

"Lady, you're too polite." Xi Rong lowered his eyes demurely. "I am but a servant and cannot sit with the general's wife."

"His Highness doesn't consider you a servant," Lin Qingyu said coolly, "so you needn't consider yourself one."

Regardless of what Xi Rong truly thought, he continued to act humble. "His Highness's personality is like that. He usually enjoys himself alongside the servants in the palace as well. He doesn't abide by the rules, but I must."

Lin Qingyu smiled, but coldness rose in his eyes. "It seems like you are unwilling to drink this tea with me under any circumstances, Steward Xi."

"Lady, you are beautiful and gracious—unlike anyone else in the world. How could a lowly servant such as myself have the right to share a cup of tea with you?"

Lin Qingyu didn't press, just said calmly, "It's up to you."

Xi Rong stood behind Lin Qingyu, silently observing the famed beauty of the capital. Lin Qingyu's appearance was flawless. Even if he merely sat there, drinking tea, he turned the cold training ground into a delicate painting.

However, the more beautiful someone was, the more dangerous they were. Lin Qingyu had first married Young Marquess Lu, then Great General

Gu. He'd once been an official close to the emperor, and, even if he no longer held his title now, he could still enter the palace. How could such a person be completely guileless?

Lin Qingyu felt Xi Rong's gaze. "Steward Xi, why are you looking at me instead of His Highness?"

Although Lin Qingyu had exposed him, Xi Rong remained as calm as ever. "I was looking at the tea in your hand, Lady. His Highness praised the tea to the heavens and even said it was tastier than the tea in the palace. Would you please tell me the secrets of the tea so that I may learn to brew it?"

Lin Qingyu put down the teacup in his hand. "It stands to reason that Steward Xi truly wishes only the best for His Highness. In the future, when His Highness travels to his princely estate, will you accompany him?"

"Naturally."

"Would you be able to let go of your regrets?"

Xi Rong's long, thin eyes abruptly widened. "I don't understand."

Lin Qingyu saw the expression on Xi Rong's face shift subtly. His lips quirked a bit as he continued, "By staying here—by staying in the palace—you would have the chance to become the Directorate of Ceremonial's head eunuch, Steward Xi. If you follow His Highness to his new lands, however, you'll only ever be an impotent steward."

The word "impotent" pierced Xi Rong to the bone. But he'd been struck too many times, and he could now maintain his composure regardless of time or place. "Head eunuch… Lady, do you know what these two words mean?"

“The head eunuch of the Directorate of Ceremonial is also called the inner prime minister. He has the most influence on inner-court politics. What do you think those words mean?”

Xi Rong’s face darkened. He was beautiful, but in a sinister way, which—paired with his expression—all but made Huantong quiver with fear. “Aren’t you afraid that I’ll misinterpret your words, Lady?”

“*Did* you misinterpret them?” Lin Qingyu retorted.

When speaking with intelligent people, one only needed to hint at things. Xi Rong clearly understood what Lin Qingyu meant, but he just remained silent, pretending not to understand.

Lin Qingyu had predicted this reaction. Although Gu Fuzhou and Xiao Jie knew each other, they were merely acquaintances, and the general had only met Xi Rong twice. It was just as Gu Fuzhou had said; it was much too early for them to scheme about an event of great consequence together. Today, Lin Qingyu was only testing Xi Rong, whose silence was already answer enough.

Since Xi Rong didn’t trust him, Lin Qingyu would give him a taste of the benefits.

“On that subject, His Highness has already moved out of the palace to live on his own estate, yet he’s still just the fourth prince. I think that when the emperor was crown prince, his brothers were initially just *titled* first-ranked princes. They received land only after the emperor took his throne,” Lin Qingyu noted. “His Majesty deals with so much every day, and he’s sick on top of that, so he may have forgotten about the matter. If someone could remind him, that would be for the best.”

Xiao Jie's birth mother was just a side-palace maid who'd had Xiao Jie after the emperor favored her. The emperor already disliked this son, and Xiao Jie was unremarkable in both military strategy and combat, so the emperor tended to overlook him. The officials wouldn't go out of their way to remind the emperor to give Xiao Jie his princedom, either; if they angered the crown prince, they'd be that much worse off. That was why Xiao Jie's princedom had been delayed for so long, weighing on Xi Rong's heart.

Xi Rong smiled. He had similarly wanted to use this meeting to see what the general's wife was capable of. "I also hope that His Highness receives his title soon," he said, adding, "Then we can leave this place, which has given us nothing but trouble."

As they spoke, Xiao Jie—who had already finished taking the Ferghana horse for a ride—returned with Gu Fuzhou. Lin Qingyu brought his husband a cup of tea, already prepared. "General, please enjoy."

Gu Fuzhou smiled. "Thank you, my wife."

Nearby, Xiao Jie excitedly told Xi Rong about the experience of riding the Ferghana horse. "Little White looks intense, but he's so, so obedient in front of Great General Gu. He went wherever the general told him to, and he slowed down and sped up on command."

"I think normal horses can do that too," Xi Rong said.

"It's not the same." Xiao Jie shook his head, explaining seriously, "I can tell clearly that it's not the same. Ugh—I don't know how to describe it…"

Xi Rong tried to hide his smile. "You've seen both the spear and the horse, and now it's late. Your Highness, it's time to return."

Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou saw them off. Xiao Jie got into the carriage first. Xi Rong once again apologized for showing up without warning, then thanked them for hosting him and the prince. At last he said, “We’ll be off now.”

“Wait,” Lin Qingyu called. “I’ll write down the secret of brewing the tea and give it to you next time. Will that be all right?”

Xi Rong bowed. “Thank you, Lady.”

As soon as the carriage left, Gu Fuzhou rubbed his face. “Why is it so tiring to pretend that my face is stony?” he complained.

Lin Qingyu turned. “What *doesn’t* tire you?”

“Sleeping.” Gu Fuzhou followed him, putting a hand on his shoulder seemingly casually. “How did the talk with Xi Rong go?”

“You were right. He has a lot of ambition.”

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “How could I have been wrong? I’ve read the entire book.”

“Ah, how wonderful,” Lin Qingyu complimented him in a deadpan voice, then continued, “He also seems to care a lot about his body’s… shortcomings. Well, I understand. The person he’s besotted with laughs and smiles innocently in front of him, yet Xi Rong will only be able to watch him marry and father children. If it were me…”

“Wait.” Gu Fuzhou furrowed his eyebrows. “‘The person he’s besotted with’? Who are you talking about?”

“Xiao Jie, of course.”

Gu Fuzhou was shocked. “Why would you think that Xi Rong is besotted with Xiao Jie?”

Lin Qingyu was confused. “Wasn’t that what you wrote on that paper? Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi; Xiao Jie and Little Eunuch.”

“Well, I also wrote down Xiao Li and the empress together. You didn’t think the mother-and-son duo could have romance between them, did you?” Gu Fuzhou clicked his tongue in approval. “I couldn’t tell that you had such an open mind, Physician Lin! I’m ashamed now—I’m nowhere near as open-minded as you!”

Although it was a rarity, Lin Qingyu was flustered. Gu Fuzhou had made his mind sound utterly perverted.

“What kind of relationship do Xi Rong and Xiao Jie have if not romantic?” he asked coldly. “Don’t tell me Xi Rong is only Xiao Jie’s confidant, and that his only motivation is loyalty.”

“Before the drunken emperor took to Xiao Jie’s mother, she was privately involved with a guard and had a child. Few people worked at the same temporary imperial abode that maid did, and no nobles resided there permanently, so she successfully hid her pregnancy for months and gave birth to a boy.”

“You mean…Xiao Jie and Xi Rong are actually half brothers?” Lin Qingyu asked in surprise.

Gu Fuzhou nodded. “After she had Xi Rong, that maid asked someone to send him out of the palace to her relatives. Her family brought him up until he was nine years old, then sent him back to the palace. After he was castrated, he became a eunuch serving Xiao Jie. But since they were only side characters, the book didn’t talk much about them. Only Xi Rong himself knows how he feels about Xiao Jie.”

“Does Xi Rong know his own origins?”

“He does. That’s why he protects Xiao Jie. But the more he protects him, the more his ambition grows. They had the same mother, but one is a prince and one is a eunuch. If that prince ascended to the throne one day, then wouldn’t Xi Rong be the older brother of the emperor?” At this point, Gu Fuzhou felt like there were some things he needed to tell Lin Qingyu. “Qingyu, in the original ending of *Huai’s Revenge on the Monarch*, Xi Rong protected Xiao Jie and went with him to the land he was given. I told you before that Xi Rong is smart and not easily controlled. A naive simpleton of an emperor with a power-hungry official close to him…especially if they were brothers…wouldn’t be a good thing.”

Lin Qingyu knew what Gu Fuzhou meant. “So, in the original book, was Xiao Cheng a good emperor?”

Gu Fuzhou scoffed. “The author glossed over it. They only said that after Xiao Cheng made Shen Huaishi the empress, Great Yu flourished like never before. If you were a magnanimous person, Lin Qingyu, you’d want to let him live. Otherwise, Great Yu might not have good fortune.”

“According to that logic,” Lin Qingyu said coolly, “Jing Ke[18] shouldn’t have tried to assassinate the Emperor of Qin, since he would’ve hindered the Qin state in uniting the nation.”

Gu Fuzhou lifted a brow. “I didn’t say that.”

Lin Qingyu laughed coldly. “If I could really help Xiao Jie take the throne, I’d naturally keep a vigilant watch on the brothers. If they were disobedient, then I’d find someone obedient instead. Xiao Jie isn’t the only member of the Xiao family.”

“You might as well sit on the throne yourself, then,” Gu Fuzhou said. “There’s a quote… ‘Are kings and generals more inherently noble than we are?’”[19]

Lin Qingyu glanced at him, the light in his eyes twinkling. “If I were emperor, I wouldn’t feel satisfied doing evil things anymore—they’d be boring.”

Returning to the study, Lin Qingyu summoned Huantong. “Take a message to the marquess of Nan’an’s estate. Say that the anniversary of Young Marquess Lu’s death is soon, and I want to offer him incense.”

Huantong started. “The young marquess has been gone for a year already?”

“Yes.”

“Time passes so quickly,” Huantong said sadly.

Hualu, as well as Lin Qingyu, remembered Lu Wancheng’s death anniversary well. She’d already pulled together a bevy of items as offerings. As she prepared some dried fruit, Gu Fuzhou happened to see her. When he noticed how many items she’d gathered, he assumed that guests were coming over.

Hualu didn’t know whether she should tell the general about the young marquess’s death anniversary. She looked hesitantly at Lin Qingyu.

“Do you not remember anymore?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“Not remember what?”

Lin Qingyu paused. “Nothing.”

Lu Wancheng’s last days had been agonizing. He was barely conscious, so of course he wouldn’t have known the date… Even if he’d been fully

aware for one last day, he had lost his ability to see.

It was good that Gu Fuzhou didn't remember. That hadn't been a happy event.

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The day before the anniversary of Lu Wancheng's death, the first snow of the winter fell upon the city. Snowflakes came down fast, sweeping across the land with the wind. Not even half a day later, the snow already covered the courtyard.

When Gu Fuzhou returned from court, he didn't even change out of his official clothes before seeking out Lin Qingyu in the study. "Qingyu, the snow outside is so thick. Let's go build a snowman!"

Lin Qingyu wasn't interested. "It's not the first time it's snowed. Why do you want to build a snowman?"

"It rarely snows in my hometown. I think that you're basically wasting your life if you don't build a snowman while there's snow." Gu Fuzhou stuck his hand in front of Lin Qingyu's eyes, preventing him from reading. "Come on, Qingyu. Just have a good time with your husband for one day, okay?"

"Huantong can have a good time with you."

Although Lin Qingyu ignored him, Gu Fuzhou didn't leave. "You're being so cold to me, Physician Lin. Did something happen?"

Lin Qingyu hesitated. "No."

"Did I annoy you?" Gu Fuzhou asked worriedly. "I can leave."

Lin Qingyu, taken aback, forced a smile. “How would you have annoyed me? I just…don’t like snow.”

Gu Fuzhou looked thoughtful. “Is it because I…”

“When it snows, the herbs I put out to dry aren’t ready until much later,” Lin Qingyu interrupted. “For a physician, sunny days are vastly preferable to rainy or snowy ones.”

Gu Fuzhou didn’t press him, but he also didn’t go build a snowman with Huantong. He picked up a book from the shelf and read quietly in the same room as Lin Qingyu.

The snow fell from day until night; even the inside of their blankets seemed to frost over. Perhaps because he was too cold, it took Lin Qingyu a long time to fall asleep. And once he did drift off, he jerked awake in the middle of the night from a dream.

There was no light in the room; he could just barely see the silhouettes of the furniture by the moonlight reflecting off the snow. Lin Qingyu’s heart pounded in his chest as he got out of bed, barefoot, looking toward the top bunk.

No one was there.

Lin Qingyu’s limbs chilled as dream and reality merged together. He stood in front of the bunk bed, forcing himself to remain calm, telling himself over and over that this was just a dream. His body was still frozen in place, unable to move. It felt as if he couldn’t control his limbs.

Behind him, a door creaked. Lin Qingyu spun to see a man’s tall figure.

“Qingyu?” Gu Fuzhou said in surprise. “How come you’re awake too?”

Lin Qingyu opened his mouth. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't make a single sound.

Gu Fuzhou lit a lamp. When he met Lin Qingyu's gaze, he seemed shocked and quickly walked over. "What happened?"

"Where did you go?" Lin Qingyu forced himself to speak and was shocked by how low and hoarse his voice sounded.

"I woke up in the middle of the night because I was hungry, so I went to ask Hualu to make some noodles." Gu Fuzhou cupped Lin Qingyu's face in his hands. "Why are your eyes red? Are you so mad that I went to eat alone that you cried?"

Gu Fuzhou's palms were warm, so warm that Lin Qingyu's eyes filled with tears again. He lowered his gaze and shook his head.

"I…I wanted to see whether you were still here," he said softly.

Gu Fuzhou stopped moving. Then, suddenly, he picked Lin Qingyu up, walked toward the bed, and laid him on top of it.

Lin Qingyu felt dazed; this scene seemed familiar to him. He suddenly felt like he was dreaming.

Gu Fuzhou kneeled in front of the bed, looking up at him. "It was snowing the day I died too, right?"

"Didn't you see it?"

Gu Fuzhou smiled. "Yeah, I saw it."

Lin Qingyu's breath caught. "Liar…" he choked out.

Gu Fuzhou pulled back from the topic. "Don't think about the past anymore," he urged. "I'm fine now, aren't I?"

“I don’t think of it often.” Lin Qingyu hesitated but still said what was on his mind. “I…I’m a bit afraid.”

He never showed others his vulnerable side, not even Lu Wancheng or Gu Fuzhou. This was the first time.

“Don’t be afraid. Think about it. I’m using Great General Gu’s body right now. He’s so strong, it’d be impossible for him to die of illness like my last body. And for now, I don’t need to go to war. Even if I did, I’d be sitting in a tent coming up with strategies, so I wouldn’t die in battle either.” Gu Fuzhou smiled. Even though he looked like a thirty-year-old man now, his smile was as clear as the sun in a blue sky. “I’ll always be here.”

Lin Qingyu was still worried. “Really?”

“Really—I swear. Do I need to write you a pledge?” Gu Fuzhou actually went to the desk, retrieved paper and a brush, and started to write. As he wrote, he suddenly laughed out loud. “I *am* twelve years older than you, though, so fifty years from now, you’ll probably still have to send me off.”

Lin Qingyu turned his head and laughed quietly.

Hearing his laugh, Gu Fuzhou lifted his head and looked over.

The beautiful man with vicious ideas sat on the bed, his lips hiding a smile, a pool of emotion in the eyes that gazed gently at Gu Fuzhou.

Chapter 71

AFTER WRITING THE PLEDGE, Gu Fuzhou solemnly handed it to Lin Qingyu. When Lin Qingyu read it, he saw that it was written in Gu Fuzhou's signature style—ramblings in informal prose scrawled all over the paper. When writing letters to others, or memorials to the emperor, Gu Fuzhou's wording was concise and refined. He wasn't an excellent writer, but he was certainly one of the best among the military officials. He only wrote whatever he wanted to Lin Qingyu. He even doodled a few drawings occasionally.

Logic told Lin Qingyu that both spoken promises and written pledges rested completely on wishful thinking. How could a page of words prevent misfortune? For now, though, Gu Fuzhou's pledge calmed his heart.

Whether he was in Lu Wancheng's or Gu Fuzhou's body, this young man had never let him down, however lazy and irresponsible he was. Lin Qingyu was willing to trust him.

He put the written pledge away carefully. "I'm all right now."

Gu Fuzhou heaved a sigh of relief, simultaneously feeling a bit regretful. Such a vulnerable, teary beauty was truly too rare. While Lin Qingyu gazed at him gently, there had been a few moments when he felt like he'd fallen into the dangerous flames of infatuation—that he could give Lin Qingyu anything he asked for. He would even get up early for the rest of his life if that was what Lin Qingyu wanted.

Meanwhile, Lin Qingyu felt embarrassed by his brief loss of composure. "Let's get some sleep," he said, trying to act calm.

“Okay.” Gu Fuzhou flipped the covers down and helped Lin Qingyu into bed, then lay beside him.

Lin Qingyu’s eyes widened. “You…”

Gu Fuzhou’s face burned. He scorned his own shamelessness as he covered them both with the blankets, saying nonchalantly, “I’ll go back up once I’ve lulled you to sleep.”

“You, lull me to sleep?” Lin Qingyu found that amusing. “Who will fall asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow, I wonder?”

When Gu Fuzhou had ordered this bunk bed made, he hadn’t taken into account that he’d be sleeping alongside Lin Qingyu in Great General Gu’s body. The bottom bunk was the perfect size for two young men to sleep side by side, but now it was clearly too small. He’d changed bodies, and Lin Qingyu had grown taller as well. The petty young beauty of the past had become a scheming mature beauty who knew to repress his emotions—however angry he felt—and find ways to pick people off in secret. Only in front of Gu Fuzhou would Lin Qingyu unabashedly reveal his malice.

Gu Fuzhou laughed and scooted closer to Lin Qingyu. Their long hair spilled onto the pillow, the strands intertwining.

“Want to hear a bedtime story?” Gu Fuzhou asked.

“Talk about your hometown,” Lin Qingyu replied.

“You seem very interested in that.”

“I’m interested in anything that has to do with you.”

Gu Fuzhou smiled widely. “Then let me tell you about mobile phones. They’re very important tools there. If you go there one day and get separated

from me, you can find me using a mobile phone. You just have to memorize a string of numbers…”

As Gu Fuzhou spoke, his voice got quieter and quieter. Soon enough, he fell completely silent. Honestly, Lin Qingyu was surprised that he’d been able to stay awake for so long. He tucked them both in and closed his eyes, lying next to Gu Fuzhou.

After a long time, when he felt Lin Qingyu’s breathing even, Gu Fuzhou opened one eye to make sure that his wife really was asleep, then opened the other.

Gu Fuzhou’s gaze was clear and bright, without a hint of sleepiness. He lay facing Lin Qingyu, a hair’s breadth of space between them. Although Lin Qingyu’s facial features were blurred in the dark, Gu Fuzhou’s heart still trembled as he watched him sleep. He couldn’t help reaching out to brush back a lock of hair that had fallen in front of Lin Qingyu’s eyes.

“Good night, Qingyu.”

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The next day was the anniversary of Lu Wancheng’s death. After seeing Gu Fuzhou off to court, Lin Qingyu took Huantong and Hualu back to the marquess of Nan’an’s estate.

A short time ago, Lady Pan had given birth to a healthy baby boy. The marquess of Nan’an’s home no longer looked dead and gray; instead, it was alive and thriving. The marquess himself looked healthy and happy as well, and things had started to go more smoothly for him in court. Not only had he

been reinstated as minister of revenue, but the emperor also intended to bestow important responsibilities upon him.

The marquess of Nan'an had gone to court by the time Lin Qingyu arrived, so it was Lady Pan who welcomed him.

"I was wondering just yesterday whether you would come, Physician Lin." Now that she'd given birth, Lady Pan looked quite healthy, if a bit plumper. Although she remained a concubine by title, the estate's servants already viewed her as the marquess's main wife.

After learning of Lady Pan's pregnancy, the marquess had seemingly concluded that he was still young and taken a few more concubines. Those concubines hadn't yet borne any children, however, so they were afraid to act out. For her part, Lady Pan wasn't interested in fighting for attention. She lived a fine life managing the household while caring for her son.

"Of course I'd come, if only for the young marquess," Lin Qingyu replied. "Is the young marquess's younger brother well?"

Lady Pan smiled gently. "The young master is plump and healthy. He's even bigger than most infants his age. At the end of last month, he turned one month old. I wanted to send an invitation to the general's estate, but the marquess said…"

She trailed off, her smile slowly disappearing.

"No need to explain. I understand." Lin Qingyu glanced at Hualu, who took out an embroidered box.

"Young Master ordered this longevity lock charm[20] made for Young Master Lu," Hualu said. "He hopes that Young Master Lu will grow up peacefully."

Lady Pan hastily stood up with the help of a maid. “I thank you, Physician Lin, on behalf of my son.”

They chatted until the time for the ritual arrived.

In the Lu family’s ancestral hall, servants placed cooked foods in front of Lu Wancheng’s spirit tablet, hoping that he could eat some new dishes in the afterlife. Then they brought over a fire pan, and Lin Qingyu put paper money into the flames, extending his regards to the dead. Lady Pan had also asked a monk from Changsheng Temple to come recite Buddhist scriptures to help Lu Wancheng’s soul reincarnate sooner.

After everything ended, it was almost time to eat. Lady Pan wasn’t sure whether to ask Lin Qingyu to stay; the marquess should be coming back soon, and he definitely didn’t want to see his ex-daughter-in-law again.

Lady Pan continued to hesitate, and Lin Qingyu didn’t leave on his own. Soon, the steward came and announced that the marquess of Nan’an had returned. Lady Pan looked helplessly at Lin Qingyu. “Physician Lin…”

Lin Qingyu only smiled slightly. “It so happens that I haven’t greeted the marquess in a long time.”

Seeing Lin Qingyu in his home only exacerbated the marquess of Nan’an’s sorrow at his eldest son’s passing. Even though Lin Qingyu was the wife of Great Yu’s finest general, the marquess couldn’t pretend to be happy to see him.

“What is the general’s wife doing in my home?”

“He’s here to pay his respects to Eldest Young Master. He means well.” Lady Pan tried to placate the marquess.

He let out a cold snort. “When Lady Lin left this household, we said that our connection was severed and we would go our separate ways. The Lu family has never included a male wife, and the general’s wife has no right to visit our home. Aren’t you afraid of humiliating the general?” he demanded of Lin Qingyu.

“The general is benevolent and magnanimous. The country and its people fill his heart, so he’d never care about something so minor. The marquess needn’t worry about him,” Lin Qingyu replied coolly.

The marquess of Nan’an choked in anger. “Must you forcibly latch onto the Lu family?!”

“It’s not me who wishes to latch onto the Lu family. It’s the Lu family that needs me to settle some things,” Lin Qingyu replied. “Lady Pan, if there’s nothing else you need to do, why not go check on the young master?”

Lady Pan recognized that Lin Qingyu wanted to speak to the marquess in private, so she moved to leave with the servants. When the marquess saw this, his tone cooled even toward his own concubine. “Are you doing whatever he asks? Don’t forget who you belong to!”

Lady Pan was shocked. “Marquess…”

Lin Qingyu had no patience for the Lu family’s conflicts. “If the marquess wants all these people to witness this, then it’s not my fault.”

“What do you mean?!”

“Hualu,” Lin Qingyu called. “Please bring Steward Zhang here.”

When Lin Qingyu departed from the marquess of Nan’an’s estate, he’d left Zhang Shiquan here to manage the accounts. Zhang Shiquan had known

that Lin Qingyu would come today, and he'd prepared the necessary items in advance, waiting outside for this very moment.

Holding a thick stack of account books, Zhang Shiquan greeted everyone. "Hello, Lady Lin. Marquess, Lady Pan."

"What is he here for?" the marquess of Nan'an boomed.

Lin Qingyu raised his eyes, and Zhang Shiquan handed the marquess the account books. The marquess picked up the volume on top and started reading it doubtfully. After a few pages, his expression grew more and more grave. "Th-this is…"

"From your reaction," Lin Qingyu said casually, "it seems you didn't know about this, Marquess."

His face pale, the marquess of Nan'an hastily dismissed everyone from the room except himself, Lin Qingyu, and Zhang Shiquan.

"What exactly is this?" he demanded. "Where did these huge profits come from, and why are they part of the estate's accounts?!"

Zhang Shiquan looked to Lin Qingyu for approval. After Lin Qingyu's nod, Zhang Shiquan said, "What do you mean, Marquess? All this money was earned by your second wife Lady Liang through painstaking effort. Of course the estate's account books would note it."

Although the marquess of Nan'an rarely asked about domestic matters, he knew which businesses his estate ran. Such huge profits could never have come from their restaurants or other properties. A word appeared in his mind, shocking him so badly he nearly collapsed.

"You must already have guessed, Marquess," said Zhang Shiquan. "Only private salt businesses run such large profit margins. And according to

the law of Great Yu, earning more than a specific amount off a private salt business means certain death. As minister of revenue, you would know that, wouldn't you?"

Of course the marquess knew. Not long ago, he had personally processed the case of a local official running a private salt business. The official's relatives had all been involved in the enterprise, and due to the sheer scale of their profits, the entire extended family had been executed. According to the records in Zhang Shiquan's account books, Lady Liang's family had committed an even more severe crime.

The marquess of Nan'an couldn't believe that Lady Liang was making such trouble, even after she'd gone crazy. He wanted to kill her right at that moment.

"That bitch!" he yelled. He turned to glare at Lin Qingyu, his eyes bulging in rage. "When did you find out? Why have you only told me now?!"

"Well, you said it yourself, Marquess—my connection with this household was severed, and we went our separate ways. Even if you make the emperor angry and fall from grace overnight, I'll continue to be the general's wife. And who knows? His Majesty might appreciate that I exposed you and reinstate my official status. Don't you think so?"

The word "expose" sent chills down the marquess's spine. "You…"

"Ah—what a pity," Lin Qingyu continued. "The young master just turned one month old. If this matter comes to light, I don't know whether he could live to see his hundredth day."

"You rotten cow!" the marquess screamed, abandoning composure. "You're threatening me with my innocent child!"

The marquess of Nan'an had lost both his sons before having a third one, and he saw this child as more important than his own life. He would have died to protect the infant.

"Threatening you?" Lin Qingyu smiled almost pityingly. "You're mistaken, Marquess. I'm only kindly bringing your attention to this issue."

"Your wife's family caused all this, Marquess," Zhang Shiquan said. "The young marquess didn't wish this issue to be brought up, so the general's wife hid all this from you so that you could return to court and regain the emperor's approval. If I were you, I wouldn't be able to thank the general's wife fast enough—much less accuse him of trying to harm you."

The marquess of Nan'an hadn't been an official for so long without learning the tricks of the trade. He knew that Lin Qingyu had only brought this up now after hiding it for ages because he needed something from him. The marquess hated being indebted to others, but for the honor of the Lu family, and for his newborn son, he couldn't do anything but bow his head. "What do you need from me?"

Lin Qingyu smiled in satisfaction. "Don't worry, Marquess. I won't ask you to do anything immoral or treasonous. I only want you to deliver a memorial to the emperor requesting that His Majesty bestow a princedom upon the fourth prince."

The marquess of Nan'an froze. "The fourth prince?"

"Yes."

Xiao Jie wasn't only ignored by the emperor; he had so little presence that even the court officials forgot that the fourth prince existed. If Lin

Qingyu hadn't mentioned it just now, the marquess of Nan'an wouldn't even have remembered that the fourth prince hadn't received a princedom yet.

"The task's that simple?" the marquess of Nan'an asked suspiciously.

"The task's that simple…for now."

At the moment, the marquess of Nan'an couldn't decide whether to agree. It was true that the fourth prince had reached the age at which he should move out of the palace to start his own family. It would be entirely reasonable to bestow a princedom upon him, but doing so might bother the crown prince.

"Why can't Great General Gu write this memorial himself?"

Lin Qingyu scoffed. "Has the marquess been scared stupid?"

"How dare you insult me?!" the marquess hissed, enraged.

"The emperor and crown prince already suspect the general. I don't want to involve him," Lin Qingyu said coolly. "Understand?"

Even if he didn't want to, the marquess of Nan'an could say only, "I… understand."

***

Although the marquess had agreed to bring up Xiao Jie's princedom, someone in the Inner Palace would also have to agree for this plan to work flawlessly. The first person that Lin Qingyu thought of was the empress. In the past, she had cared for him greatly—once he'd remarried to Gu Fuzhou, though, she became visibly colder toward him. Lin Qingyu visited Fengyi Palace several times but was always barred from entry.

The empress was only loyal toward her own family. In her eyes, Lin Qingyu had betrayed Lu Wancheng by marrying someone before the vigil period of his widowhood[21] had finished, so she no longer needed to treat him like a family member.

Thankfully, the empress had another relative besides Lu Wancheng. In fact, this relative was more important to her than anyone else.

One day, after Lin Qingyu took the emperor's pulse, Hu Ji had also just finished his shift. They walked together to the library of the Imperial Academy of Medicine. There, Lin Qingyu walked straight to the back to a locked metal door. He had a permission slip from the emperor explaining that he wanted to see all his previous diagnoses, starting from the moment his migraines had begun.

After the library guard opened the door, Hu Ji asked curiously, "What are you looking for, Physician Lin?"

"Sixth Prince Xiao Li's diagnosis."

Chapter 72

XIAO LI WAS THE EMPEROR'S youngest son, and the only legitimate one; he was fifteen years old. He should have been respected and revered in the palace, growing up spoiled beyond imagination. Instead, due to his intellectual disability, the emperor viewed him as an embarrassment and cast him into a side palace, pretending he didn't exist. As much as the empress missed her son, she only ever saw him twice a year—once during the Mid-Autumn Festival, and once at New Year's.

"The sixth prince?" Hu Ji said. "Why would you think of the sixth prince all of a sudden?"

Lin Qingyu found the row that held the princes' diagnoses. "I want to know the exact details of his illness."

Although Xiao Cheng was respectful toward the empress, the legal mother within the emperor's household, his birth mother was still a high-ranking noble consort. If Xiao Cheng eventually took the throne, the empress and Noble Consort Chen would both be empress dowagers. Yet the empress had held on to her seat for a long time, and naturally, she wouldn't want to share it with another woman.

Anyone who opposed Xiao Cheng's rise to the throne could temporarily become Lin Qingyu's ally, and if he wanted to recruit the empress to his side, Xiao Li would be the best starting point.

Xiao Li had been banished to a side palace for his entire life, and the emperor had kept his son's intellectual disability secret, so there was hardly any information about him in the palace. Lin Qingyu and Hu Ji had both only

entered the palace recently, so they just knew that the sixth prince was slow, not what had made him like that.

Hu Ji helped Lin Qingyu look for the diagnosis. “I’ve heard that the empress once searched high and low for a cure for the sixth prince’s ailment, but neither the imperial physicians in the capital nor the miraculous physicians renowned in the martial world could do anything. He must have been born incurably slow.”

Lin Qingyu agreed with Hu Ji, but since Xiao Li would be his main means to gain control over the empress, it was worth spending more time investigating.

“I think I found it!” Hu Ji pulled out a thick book. “Is this it?”

Lin Qingyu took the volume from him and flipped through it. “It really is the sixth prince’s diagnosis.”

They started reading immediately. Each physician who’d taken Xiao Li’s pulse had said it was indistinguishable from a normal one. They couldn’t even figure out the cause of his ailment, much less cure it.

The records on Xiao Li’s pulse were much, much thicker than anyone else’s. In the beginning, his was no different from the other princes’. Each day’s heart rate was normal, although he sometimes fell ill with minor afflictions before age two. After turning two, though, Xiao Li still couldn’t speak, and the empress began to panic. She found more and more physicians, and his diagnosis began to take shape. By the time Xiao Li was five years old, the emperor had completely given up; ignoring the empress’s cries and pleas, he sent his young child to a side palace.

The day Xiao Li left the main palace, one last person had investigated his ailment—not an imperial physician or traveling doctor, but the imperial

preceptor of Great Yu, Xu Junyuan. The last record in the stack read, *The imperial preceptor says that this is the affliction of a lost soul and cannot be cured.*

"A lost soul?" Hu Ji looked thoughtful. "I heard my grandmother talk about that when I was young. Infants often have unstable souls, and if they're exposed to too much shock, they may lose theirs…"

"Do you believe that?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Hu Ji laughed, embarrassed. "I know that physicians shouldn't believe those things, but many phenomena truly cannot be explained through logic."

Lin Qingyu closed Xiao Li's records. "I wouldn't have believed it either in the past. But now…"

Gu Fuzhou's soul had flown all over the world. How could Xiao Li's lost soul be any different?

"If the sixth prince truly lost his soul, nothing can be done about it, not even if the miracle physician Hua Tuo[22] reincarnates," said Hu Ji.

Lin Qingyu stayed silent for a while. "I still want to see for myself. What kinds of people are the imperial physicians working in the side palace?"

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The side palace that everyone often mentioned was called Jinyang Palace, and it was only a day's travel away from the main palace. If rushed, a horse-drawn carriage could make the trip in half a day. Jinyang Palace had been built near the water for the imperial family to spend summers in. Since

the emperor had been ill recently, he hadn't been to the palace in a long time. Besides a few of the previous emperor's elderly consorts, Xiao Li was the only member of the royal family who lived there. The maids and eunuchs there naturally wouldn't be as attentive or loyal as those in the main palace. Even the imperial physicians stationed there were the worst within the ranks.

When Lin Qingyu told his father that he wanted to visit the sixth prince in the side palace, Lin Rushan didn't question his son; he quickly arranged things for him. The first snow had fallen in the capital, and once the cold settled in, many people got sick. Most imperial physicians didn't want to go to the side palace, and Lin Rushan's excuse for Lin Qingyu's visit was that the understaffed side palace needed a physician who—though lacking a title—had real skills. Few people would interfere with that arrangement.

A return trip by carriage to Jinyang Palace would take Lin Qingyu two days. After learning this, Gu Fuzhou wanted to come along, but Lin Qingyu mercilessly rejected that idea. "Don't you need to go to court?"

"I do," Gu Fuzhou said, pained, "but I've contracted an illness. I'll wilt if I don't see you every day, Physician Lin."

"Does this illness affect your sleep?"

"Good question." Gu Fuzhou rubbed his chin, thinking. "In Yongliang it did, yes. Back then, the stupid emperor wouldn't let me come back, and I was so worried that I lost sleep."

Lin Qingyu calmly packed his medicine chest. "So long as it doesn't affect your sleep, it's not important. I'll come back as soon as I can."

Gu Fuzhou knew that Lin Qingyu was attending to serious business, so despite his complaints, he didn't try to stop his wife from leaving.

The journey went smoothly. After confirming his identity, the guards of Jinyang Palace only asked Lin Qingyu a few questions before letting him inside.

The palace grounds contained an abundance of hills and flowing water. Both tall and short pavilions and buildings had been constructed; the grounds were sure to be beautiful and lush in the summer. In the winter, however, they only looked desolate, with a few eunuchs and maids sweeping the courtyard. It didn't even look as lively as the general's estate.

Lin Qingyu followed a eunuch to the palace apothecary. Only one physician was on shift there; he was so fat that his uniform barely fit over his oversized belly. He was currently roasting potatoes over a charcoal fire. Hearing footsteps, he didn't even raise his head. "There's no medicine here," he said. "If you're sick, either get a treatment outside the palace or brew your own."

"Imperial Physician Huang," said the eunuch, "someone's here from the Imperial Academy of Medicine."

Hearing those words, Imperial Physician Huang immediately stood. Upon seeing Lin Qingyu, he seemed outright shocked. "You're…"

"My family name is Lin."

Only a few people within the Imperial Academy of Medicine had that family name, and this one was exceedingly beautiful; anyone who kept up with any news could easily guess who he was.

"Oh, Lady Lin—Great General Gu's wife," Imperial Physician Huang said with a servile smile. "I'm so sorry."

"You said there's no medicine within the apothecary?"

“Indeed no,” Imperial Physician Huang said, forcing himself to continue smiling despite Lin Qingyu’s icy expression. “As soon as winter came, more people got sick. Colds, coughs, all that. The apothecary ran out of medicine quickly.”

“What if His Highness the sixth prince fell ill? Would you tell him to either leave the palace for medicine or brew it himself?”

For a moment, Imperial Physician Huang had no words. “That… What’re you saying, Lady? His Highness’s health is fine.”

“I mean hypothetically.”

“Th-then of course we’d figure something out. His Highness is the emperor’s only legitimate son. We wouldn’t dare ignore him out of fear for our lives.”

Working in the palace had already accustomed Lin Qingyu to how certain people feigned compliance only to act insubordinately behind the scenes. “Where is His Highness now?” he said. “I’ll take his pulse today.”

Imperial Physician Huang didn’t dare to object, afraid that Lin Qingyu would rat him out to Head Imperial Physician Lin or even the empress. He could only cautiously appease the visitor. “Yes, of course. This way, please.”

As Lin Qingyu entered Xiao Li’s courtyard, he spotted a young man dressed in black squatting in the snow, his head lowered as he played with something. The day was bone-chillingly cold, but the young man wasn’t even wearing a cloak.

“That’s His Highness?” Lin Qingyu asked the eunuch.

“Y-yes…” the eunuch stammered.

Xiao Li didn't even react to the people speaking beside him. Sticking his red, raw hands into the snow, he grabbed a handful and lifted it to his mouth.

"Your Highness!" A eunuch rushed over and grabbed his hands. "You can't eat that."

As they tussled, the snow in Xiao Li's hands fell to the ground. He looked dazedly down at it, then slowly stood and peered at Lin Qingyu.

When their gazes met, Lin Qingyu was slightly shocked.

Xiao Li was extremely beautiful, quite tall and thin. He was only fifteen years old, but he was already as tall as Lin Qingyu. His eyes were delicate and handsome, and his facial features were lovelier than anyone else's, but his gaze was blank and dead. That certainly canceled out his beauty.

For some reason, Lin Qingyu thought that Xiao Li looked vaguely familiar. He bowed. "Lin Qingyu greets Your Highness."

Xiao Li didn't react. He only squatted back down and continued to scoop up snow to eat.

"Where are the aunties in charge of looking after him?" Lin Qingyu asked harshly.

Cold sweat beaded on the eunuch's forehead. "I'll look for them now!"

Lin Qingyu stood beside Xiao Li for a while, watching him. He then reached out and helped him stand. "Your Highness, let's go inside."

Xiao Li let himself be guided into the room like a zombie, not crying or fussing. Lin Qingyu sat him down in a chair and took his pulse. He could

only tell that the cold was bothering Xiao Li; other than that, his pulse felt no different from a normal person's.

Lin Qingyu finally understood what "lost soul" meant. Sixth Prince Xiao Li was naught but an exquisite shell; he was empty inside.

After a long time, the maids and eunuchs in charge of caring for Xiao Li finally arrived, each looking more frightened than the other.

These servants had been with Xiao Li for a long time. Although the sixth prince was his legitimate son, the emperor pretended he didn't exist, and the empress only saw him twice a year. The sixth prince couldn't speak, so if he was mistreated, he couldn't tattle. Thus, these servants only needed to pretend to work hard whenever the empress sent her own servants to check in. On normal days, they slacked off spectacularly.

Lin Qingyu didn't ask where they'd been. He only ordered, "Make His Highness some ginger soup. He's been afflicted by the cold."

While everyone busied themselves working, Xiao Li just sat in his chair, still and silent, as if he didn't exist in this world.

Lin Qingyu wrote a prescription for expelling a chill and told the eunuch to give it to Imperial Physician Huang. "I know that the apothecary has no medicine left. I'll tell my father to report that to the empress and ask her to send more."

That sentence essentially ended everyone's lives. "Physician Lin, I know I was wrong. I'll certainly take good care of His Highness in the future… Please, please…"

Lin Qingyu smiled kindly. "You should say that to the empress."

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Lin Qingyu didn't stay long in Jinyang Palace. He returned to the capital overnight.

"You're finally back, Physician Lin." Gu Fuzhou had just returned home from court. He was still wearing his uniform as he welcomed Lin Qingyu. "I haven't seen you in two days, and it *feels* like it's been two days."

Lin Qingyu frowned. "What are you even saying?"

Gu Fuzhou held back a laugh. "Nothing." Without asking, he took Lin Qingyu's fox-fur coat and draped it over his arm. "Do you have anything to say to me after not seeing me for so long?"

"Yes." Lin Qingyu stepped into the room. "But please pour me a cup of tea first, General."

After drinking the tea his husband had poured, Lin Qingyu recounted everything he'd encountered in Jinyang Palace. "I'll ask to see the empress again tomorrow. I don't believe she'll turn me away again."

Gu Fuzhou listened absently. "What else?"

"What?"

"What else do you want to say to me?"

Lin Qingyu thought for a while. "What did you look like before?"

Gu Fuzhou hadn't expected him to ask that. "Are you serious? Didn't you see me in that dream?"

"I forgot." For some reason, Lin Qingyu felt guilty.

Gu Fuzhou raised his eyebrows. “You said you have a perfect memory. Why did you forget my appearance?”

Lin Qingyu’s expression didn’t change at all. “How can you compare dreams to real life? Looking at anything in a dream is like looking at a reflection in water—like peering through a haze. There’s always something between people. It’s normal that I forgot.”

“But I don’t know how to describe it to you,” Gu Fuzhou protested. “Plus, I haven’t been in my original body for a long time. After a few more years, even *I* might forget my original appearance.”

Lin Qingyu sank into thought. In his dream, Gu Fuzhou’s appearance had truly shocked him. Xiao Li hadn’t even come close to that. That said, he was still a beautiful young man; what a pity that he was intellectually disabled.

Gu Fuzhou scrutinized Lin Qingyu for a long time, finally letting out a long sigh. “I’m so annoyed.”

Lin Qingyu pulled himself back from his thoughts. “What now?”

“It seems like you didn’t even miss me these past two days.”

Lin Qingyu was rendered speechless.

Gu Fuzhou was only venting; he didn’t expect Lin Qingyu to respond. But after a long time—so long that he began to feel sleepy—he suddenly heard Lin Qingyu say, “Maybe you’re wrong.”

Gu Fuzhou didn’t understand what he meant. “Huh…?”

Cheeks burning slightly, Lin Qingyu changed the topic. “I’m hungry. Let’s eat.”

Chapter 73

WHEN LIN QINGYU entered the palace to take the emperor's pulse the next day, both the empress and Noble Consort Chen were present. The empress managed the entire Inner Palace, and Noble Consort Chen was her assistant. The three royals were currently discussing plans for New Year's celebrations.

In their youths, both the empress and Noble Consort Chen had been extremely beautiful. Now that they were older, the empress was still graceful and prudent, looking every bit the mother of the nation, and Noble Consort Chen had retained a youthful appearance. She appeared no older than thirty years old; she looked like a vibrant blooming peony.

Lin Qingyu kneeled to greet them. "Your Majesty, Empress, Noble Consort."

The emperor felt frustrated with these two women; now that he'd encountered Lin Qingyu, he felt like his wives talked too much. Lin Qingyu, meanwhile, had no official title and wore plain, undecorated white clothes—but still drew attention.

When the empress saw him, her expression cooled, but Noble Consort Chen remained polite. "The emperor's headaches have lessened greatly thanks to you, Physician Lin."

"It's my honor to help His Majesty," Lin Qingyu replied.

"I've heard that it was Physician Lin who found a cure for the epidemic in the South last year." Noble Consort Chen grasped the emperor's arm. "Your Majesty, I wish to borrow Physician Lin for a bit."

“Do you feel sickly, my beloved consort?” the emperor asked absentmindedly.

“I wish to borrow him not for myself, but for the crown prince.” Noble Consort Chen’s thin brows knit tightly; she embodied a concerned mother. “Ever since the crown prince…*fell ill*, his health has been poorer. However much medicine he takes, he isn’t recovering. In the end, the Department of Imperial Physicians is culpable for all this. They can’t cure Your Majesty’s migraines nor heal the crown prince’s body.”

The emperor’s expression was cool. “I think that the crown prince is afflicted by demons of his own mind. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have botched the tasks I gave him so badly.”

Noble Consort Chen’s expression tightened slightly, as did her grip, but she forced out a smile. “The crown prince must’ve wanted to push himself harder, but maybe he truly couldn’t.”

Lin Qingyu snuck a glance at the empress. She hid her emotions well; he couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“Never mind.” Extending his wrist, the emperor told Lin Qingyu, “Go to the Eastern Palace later and tend to the crown prince.”

“I shall,” Lin Qingyu responded.

The empress hesitated briefly. “I’ve written the list of those to be invited to the New Year’s Eve feast. Please look over it, Your Majesty.”

“No need,” the emperor said noncommittally. “I trust you.”

“Why don’t you look at it anyway, Your Majesty?” Noble Consort Chen’s lips curved up. “This year, the empress left a spot for the sixth prince.”

The emperor's face fell. "Is that true?"

The empress immediately kneeled, less calm. "New Year's Eve is for family reunions! Li-er is still the flesh and blood of Your Majesty and myself, and he's the other princes and princesses' brother…"

"He doesn't understand these things," the emperor interrupted coldly. "Why make the effort to bring him?"

"Your Majesty…" the empress begged.

"Empress, don't press the issue." Noble Consort Chen made a show of mediating the conflict. "His Majesty will be angry."

He was, in fact, extremely annoyed. "Both of you leave now."

"I shall," the empress said, barely holding herself together.

After the empress and Noble Consort Chen had left, Lin Qingyu finished taking the emperor's pulse. "The root cause of Your Majesty's migraines hasn't been cured yet. As much work as leading the nation is, please remember to rest."

The emperor certainly wanted to rest. In the past the crown prince could assume part of the responsibility for governing, but who knew where the crown prince's attention was nowadays? The emperor could only attend to most things in person.

The emperor stared at Lin Qingyu. Finally, he said, "It's been a while since you married Gu Fuzhou, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is he good to you?"

Lin Qingyu smiled. "The general treats me very well."

Feeling only more frustrated, the emperor waved a hand to dismiss him.

***

After leaving Qinzheng Hall, Lin Qingyu headed right to Fengyi Palace to see the empress. The maid didn't even take a message; she just said, "She won't see you, Physician Lin. Please return."

"I went to Jinyang Palace two days ago."

The maid abruptly froze.

"I'd like to tell the empress some things about the sixth prince. Can you help me do so?"

After the maid had relayed that message, Lin Qingyu was invited into Fengyi Palace. The empress was already despondent over her inability to reunite with her son on New Year's Eve, and when she heard that Lin Qingyu had information regarding Xiao Li, she pushed aside even her personal grudge against him. "Did something happen to Li-er at Jinyang Palace?"

"Not necessarily," Lin Qingyu said slowly.

"What do you mean?" the empress demanded, concerned. "Is Li-er not leading a good life?"

Lin Qingyu shook his head. "No—not at all. When I saw His Highness, he was squatting in the snow, wearing only his inner robes and eating snow by the handful."

Tears immediately formed in the eyes of the perpetually calm empress.

“H-how could that be? Laifu! Quick, get me Laifu!”

The empress couldn’t leave the palace to see her son; she could only have the eunuch Laifu take gifts to Jinyang Palace occasionally. The gifts the empress chose were all the best, and Laifu had always reported that the sixth prince was treated extremely well. The empress had never doubted that, although her Li-er wasn’t growing up in the palace like the other princes, he was still living the extravagant life of the son of a rich family. Who knew that these servants had been lying to her all these years?

Prostrating himself in front of the empress, Laifu screeched, “I’m innocent, Your Majesty! Every time I go to Jinyang Palace, the sixth prince is being treated well! I didn’t know—I really didn’t know!”

The empress had already lost all reason and was about to have the eunuch tortured, but Lin Qingyu stopped her. “Laifu has always been your most loyal servant and confidant, Your Majesty. The problem must be with Jinyang Palace. The emperor hasn’t visited in years, making the servants lazy. They don’t earn much money either, so they naturally find other ways to gain riches.”

When the empress thought of her son’s life in the side palace, she couldn’t stop crying. “They’re bullying Li-er for not knowing right from wrong, for not being able to speak… My Li-er…”

Even if she was the mother of the nation, the empress was only a normal mother in that moment. But when she cried, she didn’t scream and wail like others; instead, she let her tears flow silently down her face. A maid gave her a clean handkerchief, saying softly, “Please take care of yourself, Your Majesty. Should you fall ill, who else could the sixth prince depend on?”

The empress wiped her tears and drew herself up. “You’re right. I still need to punish those servants in Jinyang Palace.”

“Even if you changed all of the servants in Jinyang Palace, how could you guarantee that the new ones wouldn’t treat His Highness the same way?” Lin Qingyu asked.

The empress glared at him. “What do you think I should do, then?”

“The best plan would be to bring His Highness home. That way, Your Majesty can care for him personally.”

The empress let out an odd laugh. “Do you think I don’t want to? You saw what happened today. The emperor doesn’t even want to see Li-er during the New Year’s Eve feast. How could he allow me to take care of Li-er here?”

Lin Qingyu pretended to mull it over. “The emperor’s heart may not change, but Your Majesty might persuade the crown prince and implore him to ask.”

“The crown prince?” the empress said coldly. “I thought you were smart. Why would the crown prince or Noble Consort Chen speak up for me? They’d rather that Li-er stay as far from the palace as possible.”

“That means that when Your Majesty becomes the empress dowager one day, you’ll still have to bear the pain of being separated from your son,” Lin Qingyu said coolly.

The empress seemed to catch Lin Qingyu’s drift. Her heart nearly stopped, and she dismissed the servants, then asked uncertainly, “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I believe you know your fate much more clearly than I do. And you understand what the sixth prince’s fate will be once the crown prince takes

the throne."

"How dare you?!" The empress's gaze was sharp and cold with anger. "How dare you discuss this with me?! Do you not fear execution?"

Lin Qingyu was calm. "I'm only relaying what the young marquess couldn't stop worrying about, even in death."

The empress froze. "Wancheng…?"

"Your Majesty viewed the young marquess as your own son, and he always thought of you and the sixth prince. He worried about your life in the palace—worried that Noble Consort Chen would bully you. He told me to do everything to try and help you."

The empress only looked at him coldly. "If you really cared about Wancheng, why did you marry someone else before his bones even cooled in the earth?!"

Lin Qingyu sighed quietly. "If I hadn't done that, how could I have helped you?"

The empress closed her eyes briefly, then looked at Lin Qingyu again. The man in front of her was remarkably beautiful. He stood tall and proud, and his eyes were as dark as pits, as if they were luring people closer in the hopes of drowning them.

Lin Qingyu might have had his own plans, but one thing was certain—if Xiao Cheng took the throne, her Li-er would never return.

After weighing the consequences, the empress said calmly, "What do you want me to do?"

***

The marquess of Nan'an soon asked for a private meeting with the emperor in which he mentioned Xiao Jie's princedom. The emperor was a bit surprised, as the marquess had never favored any political faction. Years ago, when the fight for the title of crown prince was at its peak, he hadn't spoken up for any of the princes. Why would he support the plain fourth prince now?

The marquess recited the words that Lin Qingyu had prepared to the emperor. "The crown prince used to be a capable ruler, but he's now ignored court issues for some time due to his personal troubles. I believe that Your Majesty can use the fourth prince's princedom as a warning to the crown prince. The fight for the throne is daunting, but it can also be useful."

Having listened to this, the emperor kept his thoughts to himself. "Let me mull it over."

***

In the blink of an eye, New Year's Eve arrived. At the palace feast, the concubines, princes, and princesses of the Inner Palace gathered to eat together. Music and dancing filled the room, and everyone laughed as they talked, joy overflowing from the palace.

Seeing that the emperor was happy, the empress said with a smile, "After New Year's, the fourth prince will be nineteen years old. It's about time to find him a wife."

Xiao Jie had just taken a bite out of a cake. He quickly swallowed it. "Thank you for your concern, Mother, but I-I'm not a high priority."

“What do you mean?” the empress scolded him gently. “Your uncles all married around your age, and some were even fathers already.”

The empress’s words reminded the emperor of the marquess of Nan’an’s request. He glanced at Xiao Cheng, who gripped his wine glass absentmindedly, looking defeated, no longer as glorious as he had once been. The emperor made his decision on the spot.

At the New Year’s Eve feast, Xiao Jie became Great Yu’s Prince of Ning.

***

Compared to the festivities in the palace, the celebrations at the general’s estate were much calmer, since the general and his wife were the only people celebrating the new year besides the servants. Still, Yuan Yin decorated the entire residence. Paper cuttings were pasted to the windows, and lanterns hung from the rafters, looking bright and merry.

After food had been served, Lin Qingyu gave the servants their new year’s break. Gu Fuzhou moved their table to the hallway, and they sat beneath the red lanterns, drinking wine as they admired the snow.

Having successfully carried out his plan, Lin Qingyu drank a few more cups than usual, his pale skin reddening from the alcohol. Even the teardrop mole beneath his eye seemed to blush.

Gu Fuzhou had practiced drinking with the army, and he had a much higher tolerance for it than Lin Qingyu did. Seeing that Lin Qingyu was a bit drunk, he asked, “Should I carry you back to bed?”

Lin Qingyu propped his head on his hand, gazing at Gu Fuzhou with misted eyes, his entire body covered in a sheen of light. “Why do you love carrying me so much?”

“Because I want to look cool for you,” Gu Fuzhou said, only half joking.

Lin Qingyu burst out laughing, then lazily reached out. “Come on, then.”

Gu Fuzhou bent down, picking Lin Qingyu up princess-style. Their bodies were so different that now, in his arms, Lin Qingyu seemed that much smaller—when in reality, the physician was considered tall among his peers.

Gu Fuzhou walked back to their bedroom and sat down on the bed. He didn’t put Lin Qingyu down, letting him sit in his lap instead. “Do you want some hangover soup?”

Lin Qingyu wrapped his arms around Gu Fuzhou’s neck and whispered hoarsely in his ear, “Why…are you hard?”

Gu Fuzhou laughed quietly. “Ah, you caught me,” he said apologetically. “Sorry, I can’t help it.” His voice was low but certain as it made its way into Lin Qingyu’s ears. “I want to…so badly.”

The reddened flesh around Lin Qingyu’s eyes curved a bit. “Want to…?”

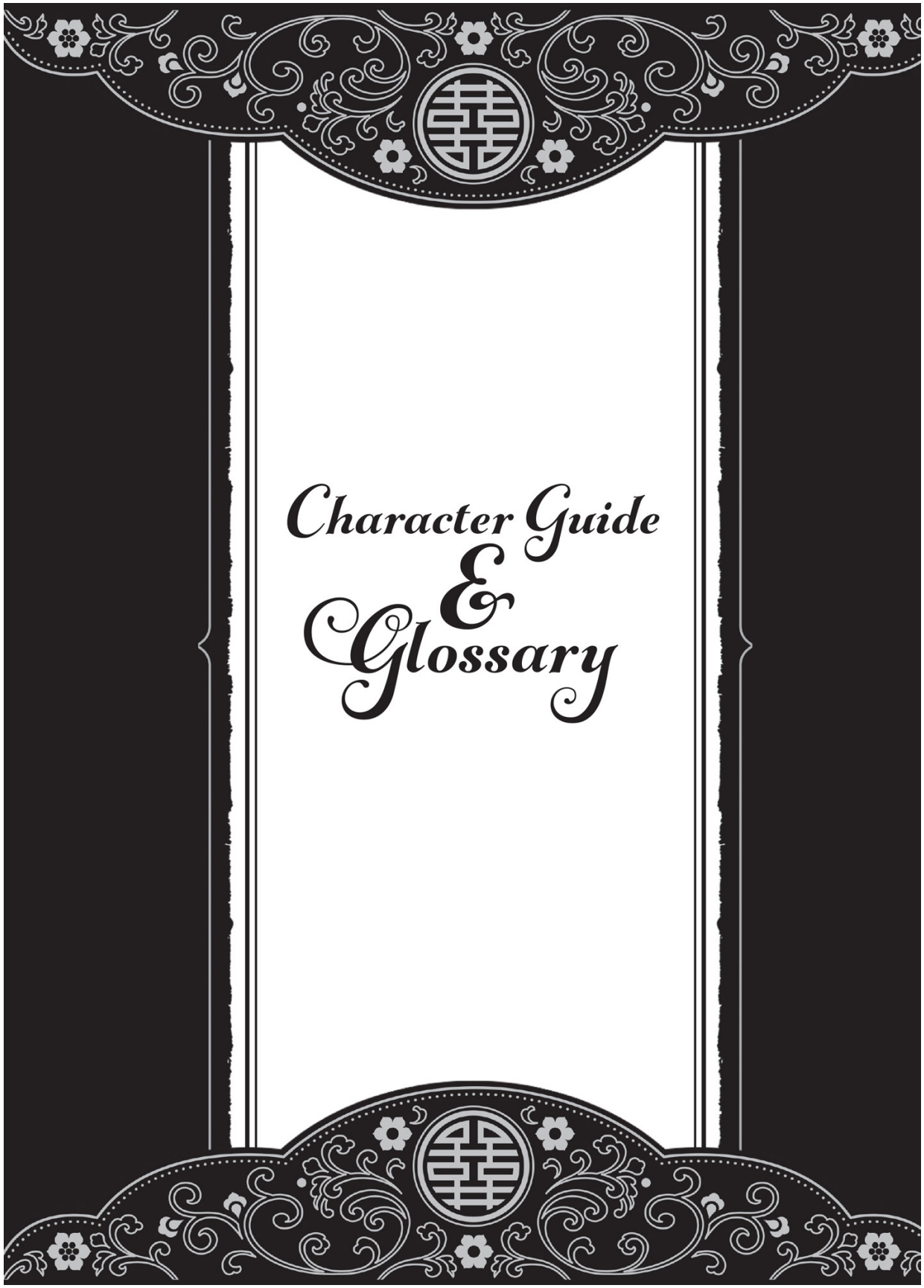
Gu Fuzhou swallowed. “You still only like girls. Right, Qingyu?”

A haze of confusion rose in Lin Qingyu's eyes, as if he himself didn't know the answer.

Gu Fuzhou sighed and placed Lin Qingyu on the bed, then turned to summon a servant to cook hangover soup. But then he felt tugging on his sleeve. When he lowered his head, he was faced with Lin Qingyu's gleaming eyes.

Lin Qingyu's voice was raspy from the alcohol. "Maybe…you're wrong."

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Thrice Married to a Salted Fish
VOLUME 3


Character Guide
&
Glossary

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

GU FUZHOU 顾扶洲: Surname Gu, given name Fuzhou. Titled “great general.” Nicknamed the “war god” of the Great Yu Empire.

LIN QINGYU 林清羽: Surname Lin, given name Qingyu. Aspiring physician. Extremely skilled in medicine.

ROYAL COURT

THE EMPEROR 皇上: The unnamed ruler of the Great Yu Empire.

EMPRESS WEN 温皇后: Empress of the Great Yu Empire.

NOBLE CONSORT CHEN 陈贵妃: Beloved concubine of the emperor. Mother of Crown Prince Xiao Cheng.

XIAO CHENG 萧琤: Son of Noble Consort Chen. Crown prince of Great Yu.

XIAO LI 萧璃: Sixth prince of Great Yu.

XIAO JIE 萧玠: Fourth prince of Great Yu.

XI RONG 奚容: Steward of Xiao Jie.

XUE YING 薛英: Trusted eunuch of the emperor.

YUAN YIN 袁寅: Steward of Gu Fuzhou.

DUKE WU 武国公: Most respected warrior of the previous emperor’s rule.

DEPARTMENT OF IMPERIAL PHYSICIANS

LIN RUSHAN 林汝善: Lin Qingyu's father. Head imperial physician.

CHU ZHENGDE 褚正德: Lin Qingyu's superior. Deputy head imperial physician.

MISCELLANEOUS

HUANTONG 欢瞳/HUALU 花露: Servants of Lin Qingyu.

MARQUESS OF NAN'AN 南安侯: Patriarch of the Lu family. Father of Lin Qingyu's late husband, Lu Wancheng.

LADY PAN 潘氏: Concubine in the marquess of Nan'an's household.

LIN QINGHE 林清鹤: Younger brother of Lin Qingyu.

GENERAL WU ZHAN 吴战: A military official serving in Great Yu's army. Nicknamed "Lao-san."

DEPUTY GENERAL ZHAO MINGWEI 赵明威: A military official serving in Great Yu's army. His title is sometimes informally shortened to "General."

PRINCESS JINGCHUN 静淳郡主: Maid from Great Yu who married into the North Kingdom.

SHEN HUAISHI 沈淮识: Shadow guard of Xiao Cheng.

XU JUNYUAN 徐君愿/"HALF-IMMORTAL XU" 徐半仙: Imperial preceptor of Great Yu.

ZHANG SHIQUAN 张世全: Accountant from Duke Wen's residence.

ZHU YONGXIN 朱永新: Butcher living in hiding.

LOCATIONS

IMPERIAL PALACE

QINZHENG HALL 勤政殿: The venue where morning court is held. Contains the emperor's quarters.

JINYANG PALACE 晋阳园: Side palace outside of the capital. Sixth Prince Xiao Li's residence.

ELSEWHERE

CHANGSHENG TEMPLE 长生寺: The most revered temple in Great Yu. Xu Junyuan practices here.

INSTITUTIONS

IMPERIAL ACADEMY OF MEDICINE 太医署: Where aspiring imperial physicians train.

DEPARTMENT OF IMPERIAL PHYSICIANS 太医院: Where imperial physicians work. They treat members of the royal family, including the emperor.

HEAD IMPERIAL PHYSICIAN 院判: Fifth-rank official. Oversees the department.

DEPUTY HEAD IMPERIAL PHYSICIAN 副院判: Deputy to head imperial physician.

COURT PHYSICIAN 御医: In charge of treating the emperor.

MEDICAL SECRETARY 吏目: Sixth-rank official. Oversees administrative tasks.

IMPERIAL PHYSICIAN 太医/医官: Department's lowest rank.

TIANJI GUARD 天机营: Group of shadow guards working for the emperor.

TIANYU SECT 天狱门: Secret counterpart of the Tianji Guard.

NAME GUIDE

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

LAO-: Prefix meaning "old." Usually added to a surname. Used in informal contexts to indicate familiarity.

-DAGE: Suffix meaning "big brother" or "older brother."

XIAO-: Prefix meaning "little" or "younger." Can be added before names or titles for juniors. Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: "Child." Affectionate suffix.

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

Family

-GEGE: Older brother or older male. Can be used as an affectionate address.

-XIONG: Can refer to older brother or male friend. More respectful and distant than -gege.

Other

-GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

GLOSSARY

SALTED FISH 咸鱼: Modern slang term describing someone unambitious or lazy.

BAZI 八字: Eight characters that comprise four pairs denoting the time, date, month, and year of someone's birth. They are used to divine someone's fortune or determine someone's marital compatibility with another person, among other purposes.

HUADIAN 花钿: Ornamental makeup that typically takes the form of a small flower between the eyebrows.

NINE-RANK SYSTEM 九品中正制: Used to classify government officials. Each rank from first to ninth is further divided into a standard and a secondary class.

TAKING ONE'S PULSE 诊脉: In traditional Chinese medicine, taking someone's pulse enables the physician to gain a deeper understanding of a patient's ailments and thus give a diagnosis.

"IF ODD, CHANGE; IF EVEN, REMAIN THE SAME; AND THE SIGN DEPENDS ON THE QUADRANT NAME." 奇变偶不变，符号看象限: A mnemonic rhyme for students studying basic trigonometry.

GU 蠱: Insects or reptiles specially bred for venom or to serve as a component in harmful magic. Gu are usually created by confining several insect and/or reptile species; after they fight, the surviving insect or reptile becomes the gu.

Footnotes

Chapter 39

[1] A small tablet engraved with a name that is used to commemorate someone or symbolize the spirit of an ancestor or deity. Spirit tablets are usually fairly small, can be made of various materials, and may be kept in a shrine or family home.

Chapter 40

[2] Couplets written on red paper and displayed during the Spring Festival express wishes for the coming year.

Chapter 41

[3] From “Ode on the Sunset over a River” by Tang dynasty politician and poet Bai Juyi.

[4] From “Shengchazi: Lantern Festival” by Song dynasty historian and poet Ouyang Xiu.

Chapter 42

[5] An official communication to the emperor from a subject of the empire.

Chapter 44

[6] The spear’s name means “blue clouds, nine continents.”

Chapter 45

[7] A traditional Chinese herbal medicine used to speed the healing of wounds.

Chapter 46

[8] Lit in front of an ancestor’s spirit tablet to demonstrate respect and veneration.

[9] From “Peach Blossoms of Dalin Temple” by Tang dynasty politician and poet Bai Juyi.

Chapter 47

[10] A loving term for one’s husband. Literally, “eunuch.”

Chapter 50

[11] A term applicable to a younger brother’s husband.

Chapter 58

[12] Lines from the Mencius.

Chapter 65

[13] Silk balls are tokens of love. During a wedding, the bride holds the ball and the groom holds a ribbon attached to it, symbolizing their union.

[14] A loving term for one's wife. Literally, "old woman."

Chapter 67

[15] The fourth of twelve hours in traditional timekeeping.

[16] The third of twelve hours in traditional timekeeping.

Chapter 68

[17] A chess-like game played with black and white stone pieces on a grid. Better known in the West as Go.

Chapter 70

[18] Jing Ke was an assassin from the Yan state sent to kill the Emperor of Qin (Qin Shi Huang). He failed, and the Qin state unified all states to form the Qin Dynasty (BCE 221–207).

[19] Line from The Grand Scribe's Records by Han dynasty historian Sima Qian.

Chapter 71

[20] Longevity locks, typically made of precious metals, are meant to "lock in" a child's good fortune.

[21] Widows were required to observe a restrictive vigil period for their husbands that could range from three months to three years.

Chapter 72

[22] Physician during the Eastern Han dynasty; the first to use anesthesia during surgery.

"If odd, change.
If even, remain the same."

In the marquess of Nan'an's household, Lu Wancheng's death has left Lin Qingyu a young widow, and he loses no time fleeing his late husband's hostile family to continue pursuing his dashed dream of becoming a physician. Indeed, the empire of Great Yu has never been as desperate for fine physicians—both the emperor and one of his finest generals are in such ill health as to threaten the country itself.

Lin Qingyu's medical talents are far from rusty, and soon enough, they ensure that he's ushered into the imperial palace. There, he waits for someone to utter the secret code Lu Wancheng taught him—the code that begins "If odd, change. If even, remain the same."

When Lin Qingyu finally hears those words, the speaker isn't the person he expected—nor are they the only person in the palace interested in Lin Qingyu. The young physician's beauty and talent have created professional rivals and even more serious threats. The speaker of the secret code may have come too late.

THE FAN-FAVORITE DANMEI ABOUT AN UNASSUMING NOBLEMAN AND HIS TREACHEROUS MALE BRIDE CONTINUES!

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